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January 26, 1892.

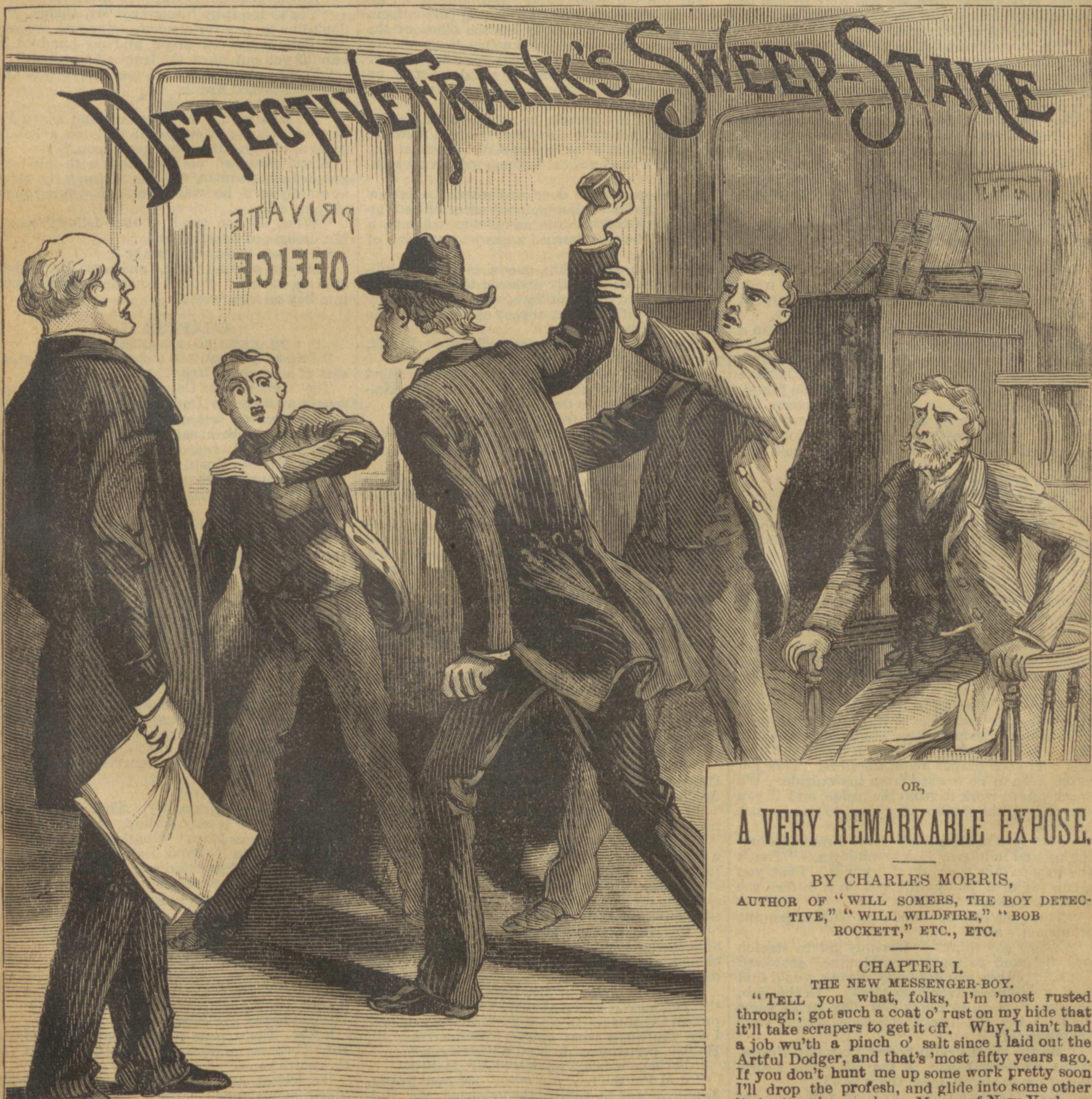
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PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS.
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

Vol. XXX.



OR,
A VERY REMARKABLE EXPOSE.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,
AUTHOR OF "WILL SOMERS, THE BOY DETECTIVE," "WILL WILDFIRE," "BOB ROCKETT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE NEW MESSENGER-BOY.

"TELL you what, folks, I'm 'most rusted through; got such a coat o' rust on my hide that it'll take scrapers to get it off. Why, I ain't had a job wu'th a pinch o' salt since I laid out the Artful Dodger, and that's 'most fifty years ago. If you don't hunt me up some work pretty soon I'll drop the profesh, and glide into some other little situation, such as Mayor of New York, or high-jinks of the rag-picking department."

The speaker was Frank Melton—Detective

DODGE GLARED AT THE TRIUMPHANT FRANK WITH THE EYES OF A WOLF; THEN, SEIZING A HEAVY PAPER-WEIGHT, MADE A TIGER LIKE SPRING TOWARD HIM.

Frank as he was known in the New York Secret Police Department—the listeners, Dick Wister and Joe Smith, detectives, Frank's employers in that useful art.

Frank—a well-grown and keen-faced boy, who had already gained a reputation as a shrewd and successful apprentice in the art of crook-catching—ended his remark with a yawn, that looked as if it would unhinge the upper half of his head.

The two detectives laughed, and winked knowingly at one another.

"You're too deucedly spry, you young scamp," said Dick Wister. "It is hard to keep you supplied. Most lambs of your size don't care how long a holiday they have."

"I ain't built that way," answered Frank. "I like best to take my holidays in work."

"I believe you do, you pattern of industry," laughed Joe Smith. "And I think we can satisfy you keen-edged as you are. What say you, Dick? Shall we put him on that new job?"

"He'll do to fill in the chinks," answered Dick, indifferently. "It's confoundedly dark now, and he might hit on a scrap of daylight. It's worth trying him, I guess."

The boy, who had been lounging lazily in a chair, lifted his head on hearing the first of these words, and by the time the last were spoken he was sitting bolt upright, as wide-awake as a terrier with a rat in full sight.

"That's your sort," he cried gayly. "I smelt work in the wind. You bet your level dollar I'm primed for anything going, and when I put my foot down worms have got to wriggle. Let her out, old cronies!"

The two detectives, who were lounging and smoking over the table in their office apartment, laughed again at the boy's ardor.

"Don't be too sure, my boy," warned Joe. "It's easy enough to drop in your line, but it isn't so easy to pull out your fish. Tell him what it is, Dick."

He lit his pipe again, it having gone out during their talk, and leaned back easily in his chair.

Dick, who had been writing during the last few minutes, now folded the note he had written, and thrust it into an envelope as he turned to the eager and expectant young detective.

"There have been mysterious robberies in a certain silk and lace store on Broadway," he explained. "During the last three months three thousand dollars' worth of valuable goods have disappeared, and no trace of them can be found. The proprietors have set traps to discover the robbers, but in vain; they are too shrewd to be caught. Detectives have been on the job these two months, but the rogues, so far, hold the reins."

"You and Joe been in it?" asked Frank.

"A trifle, lately."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why didn't we give you a bit of the moon?" answered Dick, satirically. "See here, boy." He wrote an address on the envelope he held in his hand. "Here is a note introducing you to the firm of Dodge & Halfish, the robbed parties. You are to present it to them, and will be given the position of office messenger in the establishment. If you are diligent and industrious—"

"I may get to be elevator boy; or some other rising position," supplied Frank, with a wink. "Suppose you just drop that Sunday-School taffy, old man, and let out what you got in your hand."

"We want a friend behind the scenes, Frank, that's the long and short of it," was the answer. "Your duties as messenger won't be very heavy. You will have plenty of time to use your eyes and hold your tongue about the store. This job is too deep to be worked from the outside. We want you to work it from the inside, and if you can pick up the shadow of a clew, to put us on it at once."

"Now you're shouting!" cried Frank, springing up and indulging in a breakdown. "That's the way to take the rust off my hide. I bet you a cow ag'in' a pumpkin I get on it before the world is a month older."

"There she blows!" cried Joe, with a genuine whaleman's call.

"Every boy thinks he has only got to stretch out his hand to touch a gold-mine," answered Dick. "When you get older, Frank, you'll find that gold-mines aren't so plenty. In this job, though, it is quite likely you may strike some clew to the silk-lifters. Caution, boy, is your trump card."

"Maybe it's the right bower," rejoined Frank, "but wide-awakeness is the left.—I'm ready. Want me to streak down there now?"

"Yes. Lose no time.—I'll give you your instructions; then you can be off."

The instructions were brief, and the self-satis-

fied boy paid very little attention to them. He was shrewd enough to perceive that the job could not be laid out in advance, and that his action must depend on circumstances yet to appear.

"You are wasting your eloquence on that boy," observed Joe, seeing Frank squirming uneasily in his chair.

"I am afraid so," answered Dick. "Young America is past taking advice from old experience. Slide away then, youngster, and put in your best licks. Don't forget to report weekly, and oftener, if anything turns up."

"Ay, ay!" answered Frank, as he thrust the letter into his coat-pocket, seized his hat, and made for the door. "Good-by, cronies! I'll fetch that coon, or bu'st!"

In a moment more the quick patter of his feet was heard on the stairs.

"Think he'll do it?" asked Dick, turning to his partner.

"Shouldn't wonder," answered Joe briefly, blowing a cloud of smoke from his pipe. "He's young, but wary as a weasel."

In an hour after this conversation, the detectives' deputy made his appearance in the Broadway establishment of Dodge & Halfish, dealers in silks and laces.

Yet the lad who walked into this showy establishment was a different looking person from the one who had but lately left the office of the detectives. He had stopped at his home on his way, and changed his clothes for a more sober suit, and now walked modestly and sedately up the long avenues of the store, looking as mild as if butter would not melt in his mouth.

Accosting a salesman, he asked for the office of the proprietors in a shy and subdued manner; and entered it after a respectful knock at the closed door, and a short "Come in!" from within.

Frank opened the door and entered. He saw before him a well-appointed office, fitted up neatly with desks, tables and chairs, while on a hearth at the rear burned a gas-jet imitation of a wood-fire.

Two men sat within, one a handsome, full-faced gentleman, neatly dressed; the other small of frame and sharp of face, wearing a shabby coat, and with his hat thrust carelessly on the back of his head.

"Can I see the proprietors?" asked Frank, respectfully, hat in hand.

"You see them now," answered the short man. "I am Mr. Dodge, and this is Mr. Halfish. What can we do for you?"

"I was told you wanted a messenger-boy."

"Were you? Then the man who told you that didn't mind lying; or, he knew more about our business than we do."

"You are laboring under an error," broke in Mr. Halfish, blandly. "We are not in want of a messenger, my lad."

"Well, if you don't want a messenger, I don't want a job; so we're square on that," answered Frank, in so different a tone that the two merchants looked up in surprise. "I reckon, though, it is you who are mistaken."

"We?" answered Mr. Dodge, sharply. "What do you mean, boy?"

"Please run your eyes over this letter," rejoined Frank, producing the document Dick Wister had given him. "I think it will explain my Greek." He helped himself to a seat with an independent air, and laid his hat on the table before him.

Mr. Dodge tore open the envelope, and quickly took in the contents of the note. He whistled as he handed it to his partner.

"That changes the situation," he remarked, fixing his eyes sharply on the boy. "After all, maybe we do want a messenger."

"I thought you did," answered Frank, demurely.

Mr. Halfish lifted his eyes from the letter after a hasty perusal, and fixed them with a doubtful look on the deputy.

"Messrs. Wister & Smith have sent you?" he queried. "You hardly look like a person suitable for the task we have in hand, though—"

"Do you want me to look like a person suitable to the task?" asked Frank, with a sudden change of expression and attitude. "If you do—"

"No, no!" broke in Mr. Dodge, with a laugh. "If you look as sharp as that, young man, you'll put all the thieves in New York on their mettle. I see you know what you're about.—After all, Halfish, perhaps we do need a messenger."

"Perhaps we do," answered Mr. Halfish.

"And I'm the boy you need," assured Frank, as he rose and picked up the note that Mr. Halfish had laid on the table. "Are you done with this, gentleman?"

"Yes. Why?"

"The safest way to get rid of gunpowder is to set fire to it, that's all," averred Frank, as he thrust the note into the flames on the hearth. "If your silk thief was to see this bit of paper, I might as well pull up stakes and emigrate."

The merchants looked at their visitor with growing respect. They had been thoroughly deceived at first by Frank's demure manner. This last act of caution showed them they were dealing with a boy detective.

"When are you ready to take hold?" asked Mr. Dodge.

"Now, if you say the word.—That would look too sudden, though. Say Monday morning.—What's to be my duties?"

"Your visible ones will be to take messages from us to other business houses; your invisible ones—"

"To spot that silk-skinner!" supplied Frank. "You've got to give me some loafing time for that.—What's the compensation?"

Mr. Dodge looked at him questioningly.

"Four dollars a week—" he began.

"For messenger;—and four for detective;—that will do," broke in Frank; "and tips when the goose is cooked."

Mr. Halfish laughed.

"He has got you, Dodge," he said.

"You're too steep," answered Mr. Dodge. "I don't like to pay for chances. Suppose we say five dollars a week down, and one hundred in hand if you put us on the track of the thief."

"Two hundred more if I make a scoop of the plunder?" asked Frank.

"We might venture that."

"It's a bargain. Monday morning sharp I'll be on deck. I reckon you'll find me a handy messenger-boy. Good-by, gentlemen."

Frank resumed his hat, and with his shy and demure manner, walking through the store as quietly as if he was afraid of waking some sleeping echo.

"What do you think of that fellow?" asked Mr. Dodge, of his partner.

"The boy looks wide-awake."

"May be worth trying," answered Mr. Dodge, shaking his head, "but I don't take much stock in a boy on such work."

CHAPTER II.

TRACKED TO A GAMBLING-DEN.

"I suppose you can tell a chap o' my size what sort of a boozing place that is?"

The speaker was Detective Frank, now messenger-at-large to Dodge & Halfish; the party spoken to was a somewhat foppishly-dressed gentleman, with a cane the size of a club; the place indicated, was a house on one of the off streets of New York, which looked very much like those surrounding it, except that there was a modest-looking drinking-saloon on its ground floor.

"Aw, boy, did I hear you speak?" asked the foppish individual. "Why, aw, did you put that interrogation to me?"

"'Cause I wanted to know, and I reckon Dick Wister is posted, if anybody in this town is."

"Why, you thundering young cub!" exclaimed the seeming fop, with a total change of manner; "are you on me that easy? And I thought I was got up rather clever."

"So you are," and Frank looked at him admiringly. "I knew you like a dog does his master—by smell, not by shape. That loud scent you use on your handkerchief gives you away."

"The deuce it does!" answered Dick, loudly. "By Jove, I never thought of being run down by scent!—What are you on here, Frank?"

"Do you twig this ken?" queried Frank.

"Yes."

"Is it on the square?"

"It's a gambling den, boy. That ale and chop-house in front is only a blind. Inside the wild tiger, faro, runs loose. What's in the wind?"

"I tracked a Dodge & Halfish man in there an hour ago. A married man; three kids; light salary; can't afford to buck the tiger except he's got an extra income." Frank shook his head knowingly.

"Who is it?"

"Harry Brown, their head salesman."

"Harry Brown!" echoed the detective. "We dropped him as a quiet, orderly, home-loving, religious character.—Are you sure of your man?"

"Dead sure, my chief!"

"Ah! That opens a new deal. Plays faro, eh? Then we must track him.—Let me see. If he knows you—"

He looked at Frank closely; and then, with quick hands, made certain changes in his apparel which gave him a different appearance. Next, taking a box from one pocket and a brush

from another, he skillfully lined and shaded the boy's face, so changing his expression that he would not have been known by an intimate friend, except on close inspection.

"Haven't time to build you up from the ground," Dick said, "but if you keep in the background Brown won't know you. Come, now, we'll see what is going on inside."

He walked into the drinking-room, followed by Frank, whose face looked four years older, from the artistic markings on it. Dick was once more the Cockney exquisite.

"A private room, aw; with a chop and a double go o' hale," he said, in a drawling tone, to the barkeeper. "Hold Henglish brew, you know."

"Ay, ay, sir! Jake, show this gent to Number Six. Follow that man, your Honor, and the chops and ale 'll come brisk arter."

"And don't forget, aw—aw—that'll do. Sharp up, you know." Dick followed the waiter, with his nose in the air, and his cane-head at his chin, Frank coming close in the rear.

The bartender winked at his customers.

"That's a guy," he said. "Hamerican-Henglish, you know." He laughed satirically. "Ain't the ginuwine brand, nary time."

"Pretty fair imitation," answered one of the customers. "But the chap ought to be ditched, for a counterfeit."

"Bless my 'art, Joe, if we soaked all the fools there'd be few dry 'uns," rejoined the bartender.

Meanwhile the two gents and the waiter had reached a small private room to the left of the bar-room. Dick looked doubtfully around this grimy apartment.

"Can't you do better?" he asked.

"This is the only private room we've got."

"That won't wash, my gay fella," answered Dick superciliously. "We've had our eye teeth cut. Take us to number one, my lark."

The waiter looked at him sharply.

"Number one?"

"Ay; back of number four, don't you know."

"Oh, if you gents is on that? I didn't twig," said the waiter. "You don't want the chops and ale, then?"

"Yes, if we can get a good chop out of a tiger's hide, you know," and Dick winked knowingly.

"I see, gents; come this way."

The man led into a hall, and up a flight of stairs. At the head of these a short passage led to a closed door, on which he knocked in a peculiar manner.

The door opened and revealed a well-lighted room, which was occupied by a considerable group of men, who were crowded around a table in its front. A glance showed on the table a faro lay-out, while behind it sat a dealer, mechanically handling the cards. At the side of the room was a sideboard, provided with decanters of liquor and light wine.

Scarcely any attention was paid to the newcomers by those already around the table. They were too intent on the game, on which the most of them had money staked.

Frank touched Dick's wrist, and silently indicated a person who stood at the left of the table, his eyes very intently fixed on the cards which the dealer was handling one by one. He was a well-built, florid-faced, good-looking young man, whose nervous excitement of manner was not that of the hardened gamster.

His quiet, plain attire was in marked contrast to that of a gentleman who stood beside him—a handsome, sharp-featured young sport, rather loudly dressed.

They seemed friends and companions, for as the next card turned up the last named person laughed lightly, and said in easy carelessness of tone:

"Lost, again! Come, Harry. Jonah's swallowed the whale, this time. Fortune's a fickle jade, you see. Let's be off, before she strips a fellow of hat and coat."

The person addressed made no answer, but turned from the table with a half-despairing look, his face growing very pale.

"If this would only end it," he said in a low tone, as they passed the two detectives.

"No such good luck as that," answered the other lightly. "By Jove, Harry, I wish you would give up your bad habits, but there's no hopes for an old gambler. It keeps me busy dragging you away from the table."

He laughed in a peculiar fashion, while the only response of his companion was a deep sigh. The next moment the door shut behind them.

Dick and Frank looked at each other.

"Who is the sportive individual?" asked Dick.

"George Dodge, son to the old man, and as clever a fellow as there is in the store."

"What the deuce is he laughing about? If

his friend is going to Old Nick at such a speed and he trying to stop him, tears would fit the situation better."

"Tears from him! Why he's so light-hearted that he'd laugh if he saw his own coffin," answered Frank. "Well, what's next? Are we to keep them in sight?"

"No, we've seen all that's necessary, now. Did you notice Dodge come in here?"

"Not I. He must have slipped in when my back was turned."

"He knows Brown's weakness, that's evident, and is trying to save him. Hang it, I took a different notion of this young man. But if he's bucking the tiger at this rate there's no telling how much he may have sunk. Dodge is loyal to him, it seems, but I fancy we've struck our man. Keep your weather eye on Harry Brown, my boy. He is our meat."

These words were spoken at the rear of the room, out of hearing of the gamblers. Dick now advanced, followed by his apprentice, and laid a few small bets on the table, all of which were quickly swallowed up by the greedy jaws of faro.

He then turned carelessly away, followed by Frank.

"You see what a sure thing it is, my lad," he said. "Sure for the bankers, I mean. I have dropped a dollar or two into the tiger's maw as a lesson to you to keep away, and not tempt fortune in this shape."

"I have no taste for it," answered Frank. "If I had, Harry Brown's face, just now, would have cured me of it. He looked ready to jump into the river."

"You're right there." They had now reached the street. "Good-night, Frank; I have other work before me this evening." They parted and walked away in opposite directions, though Frank's walk was by no means a rapid one.

In fact, he was far from satisfied. The detective instinct in him was so strong that even his employers were not exempt from his thirst to investigate. He stopped after taking a few steps, and looked after the form of Dick Wister, rapidly disappearing in another direction. The boy laughed lightly to himself.

"Didn't I twig him neat?" he said. "He's got up gay, too. I'd never known him only for that twirl of his handkercher and the loud smell sweet he carries in it. There must be something deep afloat for Dick to get up in such a rig.—What is it? By the jumping Joseph I'm going to try and find out!"

The next minute he was walking in the same direction as the detective, who was then just visible in the distance.

Frank continued at this distance in the rear. He knew too well the sort of man he was following to track him very closely. If he wanted to get on any of Dick Wister's work, he must be sharper than Dick Wister, and that was not an easy task.

The light of the street lamps barely revealed the figure in the distance, but there were few other persons in the streets they were traversing, so Frank had no difficulty in keeping his chief in view.

For twenty minutes and more the pursuit continued, Dick walking straight onward, without deviation to right and left. They had now reached the fashionable quarters of the city, and Frank drew closer up as the streets became more thronged.

At length, the disguised detective turned a corner sharply into Fifth avenue, and disappeared. Frank hurried forward at nearly a run, fearing to lose him.

When he reached the avenue it was to see the detective on the steps of a mansion at some distance up the street, his form clearly revealed in the light of a neighboring lamp.

Frank moved cautiously onward, and was still some distance from the house when the door opened and Dick entered.

"Getting high-toned, you are, Dick Wister," said the boy to himself. "Never knew you was a Fifth avenoodle. I wonder if they deal some sort o' high-toned faro in there, or what is it? By gum, I'd give my hat to know."

He hurried up to the stately mansion, looked closely at its number, and took a mental record of the same.

"I'm bound to find out who lives there, before the world's a day older," he commented. "I know the cop on this beat, and if there's anything shady he'll put me on it.—Now I reckon I've about done my night's work, and I'll toddle off home."

But he didn't. Instead, he seated himself on the steps of the mansion, and sat there swinging his legs independently, and thinking deeply to himself, till half an hour had elapsed.

"Don't know what I'm hanging about here for," he then said to himself. "Dick's going to stay all night. Maybe I'd best—"

His sentence was not concluded, for just then the door of the mansion creaked, and Frank slipped hastily from the step to the pavement.

The next instant the door opened widely and steps and voices were heard. The young detective was now coiled up like a ball in the dark recess at the bottom of the high stone steps.

"You see, miss, aw, as I was saying, you know," came in the drawling voice of the counterfeit cockney, "it's not to be considered under the circumstances, don't you see?"

"Why, I may see when it clears up a little," came in a soft, sweet, and half-laughing voice. "But it is a little mysterious now."

"But, don't you know, miss, you must think over it, and you'll find it as clear as—aw, I really declare, it's past ten, and I must actually be going. Good-night."

"Good-night," came in the same soft tones.

The disguised detective walked away. The woman stood looking after him. After a minute, a low laugh came from her lips, and she said in amused tones:

"The fellow is as mysterious as the Sphinx. With his 'aws,' and his 'don't you knows,' I know just about nothing. But I fancy he knows more, for he seemed to be on the search for information about my guardian. I do wonder what it all means!"

Frank listened to these words like one in a half-trance. It was much less what was said, than the voice which said it, that attracted his attention. He had heard that voice before—where? when? He could not remember, yet it was very familiar to him.

Eager to settle this difficulty in his mind, he half-rose and glanced upward, hoping to see the features of the face of the woman above him.

He was barely in time; she turned just as he rose; all he caught was a passing glimpse of her side face, a tantalizing view, which more than ever convinced him that he knew her, yet left him in the same doubt that her voice had done.

The next instant she stepped back within the open door, and closed it behind her.

"Who in the world is she?" the boy asked himself. "I know her as well as I know the nose on my face, and yet she flies out of my memory like a swallow.—And what's Dick Wister on, here! If there ain't something here for me to get on the right side of, I'll sell out."

He walked slowly away, lost in deep thought.

CHAPTER III.

FRANK ON DUTY.

THE new messenger had been two weeks on duty in the store of Dodge & Halfish. He was still the same demure and retiring lad he had appeared at first. After showing a trace of his true character to the proprietors, he had fallen back into his assumed role, and the employees in the establishment looked on him as a very modest and backward youth.

He was kept moderately busy by the proprietors, though he had considerable spare time, much of which he spent in wandering listlessly about the establishment; and it was noticed by some that, despite his unobtrusive manner, he seemed to have made the acquaintance of about everybody in the store at the end of the two weeks.

He had in reality, gone much further than this. He had gained from the proprietors some knowledge of the history and character of all their employees, which he had pieced out by quiet questioning in the store, among their friends, and their enemies where they had any. In this way he had already gained a fair working knowledge of the people with whom he had to deal, a foundation for the work which lay before him.

Frank's incessant curiosity, however, attracted the attention of one person in the establishment. This was George Dodge, the good-humored but sharp-witted son of the senior member of the firm.

"By Jove, for a specimen of shy soberness, that new boy of yours is the most curious young rascal I ever ran across," he said to Mr. Halfish. "And the chap, quiet as he is, has a very corkscrew faculty of getting hold of leading points. He's a born pump."

Mr. Halfish laughed.

"I noticed something of that in him," he remarked. "The youngster has an itch to know. He can't keep quiet even in the office, and has ventured to ask me questions."

"Faith, he has asked enough about you, and my respected paternal parent as well," laughed George. "The rascal's thirst for knowledge goes from top to bottom."

"It's lucky we've got nothing to be ashamed of," answered Mr. Halfish. "The lad does his duty very well, and his besetting sin is a very innocent one."

"It is a confoundedly prying one," rejoined George. "If he tries it on me, by Jove! I'll give the young ferret some history that will astonish him. I suppose he would swallow fairy tales as easily as facts?"

"Quite likely," answered Mr. Halfish with a laugh. "Folks with an appetite for information ought to have plenty. You'll likely find him ready to believe anything, no doubt."

Frank entered at this moment in his usual demure manner.

"I saw Mr. Jones, of Jones & Wilson, sir," he announced respectfully. "He said it was not necessary to write; I could carry his message."

"Very well; what was his message?" as Frank stopped speaking.

"He will be on 'Change at three P. M., and hopes to see you there."

"Ah! that will do."

"Is there anything else, sir?"

"Not just now."

"Shall I go out into the store, sir?"

"Yes; I will send for you if I need you."

"Thank you, Mr. Halfish."

Frank turned with a respectful bow, and left the office.

As the door closed, George Dodge broke out into a laugh.

"What sort of clay is the fellow made of?" he asked. "There must be some boyish deviltry under all that show of pussyism. By Jove, I've half a mind to take the youngster in hand and show him something of life. It's fun to shake off the bark from young piety."

"I wouldn't do it, George. He will learn soon enough."

"Don't trust me," answered George, laughing. "I would like nothing better."

He left the office as he spoke, with a very merry face, throwing jokes to the clerks in the outer office as he passed through.

He had not got far into the store when Frank returned, and entered the inner office, where Mr. Halfish still sat. The boy's manner was now very different.

"Well!" said the merchant, looking up questioningly. "You have had two weeks, Frank. Have you struck any clew?"

"Have you missed anything since I have been here?" asked Frank, helping himself easily to a chair.

"Nothing. The mysterious thief seems to have suspended operations."

"Has any hint—"

"About you? No."

"Then he has stopped on general principles. Smells a rat, very likely. Do the folks in the store know about these robberies?"

"The whole matter has been kept secret."

"Then either our thief is one that knows the secrets of the office, or has seen you in conference with detectives. He knows that you've missed the stolen goods; you can count on that."

"Nobody knows the secrets of the office, but I and my partner. Unless you—"

"I'm an oyster, Mr. Halfish. I take in, but I don't let out.—As for these two weeks, I've spent them in finding out who people are. Got to know the sort of goods I'm to handle before I begin to deal."

"George Dodge says you're an excellent example of a patent suction-pump."

"He does, eh?" Frank looked up quickly. "He's dropped onto that, then? I must have been pumping too lively. Anything else?"

"If you try it on him he is going to load you up with fairy tales."

"Good!" laughed Frank. "I rather take to Mr. Dodge. He's a jolly fellow. And, bless you, won't I swallow his fairy tales for the solidest sort of facts!"

"That is not all. He wants to stake you up, and see if there is any of the genuine boy in you. He vows you have been made wrong, and says he will take you out and show you something of life in New York."

"The blue blazes he will!" cried Frank. "My, he must think me a green one! But, won't that be a neat bit of sport!"

"I'd rather you'd not go with him," answered Mr. Halfish. "George is a little bit fast, and you're only a boy. Take my advice, Frank, and refuse to go. You'll learn evil fast enough, without George Dodge's lessons."

"Fast, is he?" asked Frank.

"Rather. Of course, I don't know much about him outside the store. He is only a little of a gay young man about town, that's all."

"He seems thick with your head salesman.

Mr. Harry Brown.—What sort of a man is that?"

Mr. Halfish started slightly at the question, and answered quickly:

"A quiet, innocent sort of man, I fancy. Have you—"

"Nothing, sir. All I can say now is, that when I get solidly down to watching, Brown will be one of the men watched."

At this moment there was a knock from outside, and at Mr. Halfish's "Come," a clerk entered.

"Do you want me any longer just now, Mr. Halfish?" asked Frank, respectfully.

"No; you may go."

Frank walked quietly out into the store, where he spent the next hour or two lounging about, occasionally passing a word or two with salesmen who seemed unoccupied, and keeping his ears wide open for all that was said in his hearing.

The establishment of Dodge & Halfish was an extensive one, with a large and showy retail department down-stairs, and wholesale rooms on the second and third floors. The spacious basement was devoted to packing purposes.

The building was well-filled with costly goods, the whole representing a large value in money. The employees were numerous, consisting principally of salesmen in the retail and wholesale departments, packers and shippers, and counting-house clerks.

Altogether there was a large number among whom to seek the mysterious thief, who had hitherto conducted his operations so skillfully that not a trace had been found.

The shrewd boy perceived that it might need many weeks to run down the cunning fox.

But at any moment something might give him a clew. Incessant vigilance was his role, and keen investigation was required of the life and habits of any one whom there was reason to doubt.

"So far, I've only struck one point," he said. "Innocent Harry Brown, with his wife and three kids, is a gambler, and a losing one. His salary won't stand much of that, and it's got the strain on it now. From his look that night his purse is mighty light. If he's our man he'll soon have his claws on again."

"And it's a curious thing that George Dodge knows all this and is covering it up. This may be pure friendship, but Mr. Dodge had a queer laugh that night. I ain't just got his measure yet. He's a chestnut with the burr on, and I've got to wait till it opens before I can see what's inside."

"And then there's Dick Wister, with his 'aw—aw,' and his fool get-up. What the deuce is he on? He and Joe Smith play it on me, and I'd like to get my work in on them. I wonder if Dick's game had anything to do with this job?

"Then there's that woman! I know her like I know beans. She's bobbing somewhere round in my brain, but I can't no more get hold of her than I can of a flea. But I'm bound to find out who she is, somehow, if I have to invade that big Fifth avenue house."

At this point in his reflections he was interrupted by a call.

"Mr. Dodge wants you, boy," was the demand.

"Very well," answered Frank, respectfully, as he rose from his lounging attitude.

Mr. Dodge was addressing an envelope as Frank entered the office.

"Here you are," he said. "Take this letter to its address, and wait for an answer. Be spry about it, my lad."

"About taking, or about waiting?" asked Frank.

"Save your wit, youngster, till you are asked for it.—Off, now."

Frank took the letter and set off briskly. But on reaching the front of the store he stopped long enough to read the address:

"MRS. FELIX MARCHMAN,

"No. — Fifth avenue,

"NEW YORK."

He stood as if he had received an electric shock.

"If it isn't the same number I'll be boiled for a mackerel!" he ejaculated. "Who'd thought the way into that house was going to open out so easy? I'm to wait, am I? I'll wait and watch, for I'm bound to find out who that pretty-faced woman is, that I know so well and don't know so mightily. Here goes."

He set off as briskly as Mr. Dodge could have desired, greatly elated at the way luck was playing into his hands.

CHAPTER IV.

FRANK MAKES A BRACE OF DISCOVERIES.

THE alert messenger was not long in reaching the Fifth avenue mansion to which his letter was directed, and which he was so anxious to investigate.

The opening door admitted him into a broad and showily-ornamented hall, with folding-doors on each side and a spacious walnut stairway leading to the floor above.

"Does Mrs. Marchman live here?" he asked.

"This is Mrs. Marchman's mansion, sir," was the pompous reply of the liveried footman who had admitted him.

"Then I'd like to see her."

"Your name, sir;—and your errand," asked the important-looking servant, with an air of crushing haughtiness.

Frank looked at the fellow from head to foot. He wasn't used to being questioned in this way, and decided to take the lordly gentleman down a peg.

"Here's my hat," he said. "She'll find my name inside that, under the lining. Does your Honor think that she'd like to know my age, and how many potatoes I can eat at a meal?"

The pompous lackey looked at the independent boy as if he could have swallowed him.

"Your name, sir, and your errand," he repeated in the same haughty tone.

"My name's George Washington Jenkins; my errand's to bring your lady a letter from the Emperor of China," rejoined Frank. The boy had so long repressed his natural exuberance, that he could not resist the temptation to let some of it out on this swelling Jeems.

"The letter," replied Jeems, stiffly, with extended hand and impassive face. "I will deliver it."

"I don't believe you will," said Frank, with a knowing wink. "I'm high-cockalorum to the emperor, and pass in my own documents. Skip, old man, and tell the lady I'm on deck."

Mr. Pomosity looked at the impudent boy as if he could annihilate him. He seemed divided between the impulses to kick him out of doors and to deliver his message. As it was, duty got the better of inclination, and he stiffly turned and ascended the stairs, leaving the triumphant boy leering at him, with his tongue in his cheek.

"Tain't the regular go," said Frank to himself, "but I couldn't help it. The fellow's so blazingly blown out that I felt like sticking a pin in him. I reckon they raise this sort, like they do pug dogs, for big houses."

A few minutes sufficed for the pompous servant to deliver his message. He returned with an impassive countenance.

"Mrs. Marchman will see you," he announced. "In the blue drawing-room. Door at head of stairs."

"All right, my jolly funky. I knew she would. Nobody backs water on the Emperor of Chiny."

With a familiar wink, that almost made Jeems explode, the tantalizing boy walked up the stairs, feeling in his democratic heart that he had only done his duty in affronting one of the minions of pride and aristocracy.

The door of the room to which he had been directed stood open, and within it appeared a tall and showily dressed lady, with a face on whose youthful beauty of color and feature middle-age had made little impression.

She awaited Frank's advent with a smile of amusement.

"What is your message?" she asked. "You do not look much like a Chinaman."

"Did that pigeon-brained idiot get that off on you?" queried Frank laughing. "Why, ma'am, I was only guying him. The fellow's made of wood and putty, with a lump of mud for brains. —I've got a letter for Mrs. Marchman, if that's you, ma'am."

"From the Emperor of China?" she answered, with a smile, as she held out her hand.

"No ma'am; from Mr. Dodge, of Dodge & Halfish."

"Mr. Dodge!" she answered, with a quick change of tone. "Let me have it."

"I am to wait for an answer," announced Frank, as he handed her the letter.

She took it from his hand, with, as he fancied, a show of nervous haste, and walked toward the upper end of the room as she tore open the envelope and opened the letter.

Frank watched her closely. Her back was toward him, but there were slight movements of her form which to him indicated some excitement or emotion. She turned, after a minute, with the letter clutched in her hand.

"There is an answer," she said. "You will need to wait some little time, and—"

She paused as a gentleman entered the room,

a man of small size and spare face, with a retreating chin, and eyes that seemed to shift uneasily from place to place.

"You will find a chair in the hall, outside," continued Mrs. Marchman. "Or if you like pictures, you may see some in the gallery opposite. You will need to wait awhile."

"Thank you, ma'am; I do like pictures, and think I'll take them in."

Frank left the room, the door of which was immediately closed behind him. This was not so quickly done, however, but that the boy's sharp ears caught these words in the clear tones of Mrs. Marchman:

"The soup is thickening, Felix. Dodge writes—" The closing door cut off the remainder of the sentence.

But Frank had heard enough to set him thinking. What did she mean? Could he be on the track of a mystery? He would have given much to hear the remainder of that conversation.

"What's up between old Dodge and this fine lady?" he asked himself. "Is it something underhand?—I noticed that Mr. Halfish wasn't in the office when he handed me the letter. By gum, I'd like— But this is Dick Wister's go, and I reckon he'll fetch it. No use in me meddling."

Yet the curious boy looked around him inquiringly. The detective instinct was awakened in him, and he was eager to discover if there were any possible means to hear the conversation in the closed room.

The keyhole was inadmissible, for the door was in full view of Jeems below, if he should choose to look up the stairs. At the rear end of the hall was a window, with raised sash.

Frank sought this window, which he found to look out on a spacious yard, behind the mansion. As he stood there he heard a low murmur of voices, which seemed to come from the next room. Looking out the window he saw near it a second window, belonging to the room he had just left. The sash of this was raised, and the speakers within seemed close beside it.

"Maybe I can pick up some bits of their confab yet," he said to himself, joyfully. "The scrap I caught was only enough to give a chap an appetite for more."

At first he heard nothing but disconnected words. Then the lady's voice was raised as if in momentary excitement.

"I don't trust him, I say," came plainly to Frank's ears. "He plays double."

"He wouldn't dare to you, Laura. You have a safe hold on him, he writes letters."

"Yes, yes, I know that." Her voice sunk again so that the next words were lost.

For several minutes the young detective heard only indistinct sounds. Then he caught the following words:

"If Dodge & Halfish go under, Dodge will come out on top. He's sharp enough to sow wheat for himself and tares for his trusting partner."

"Think there's danger of that, Laura! Then what had we?"

"Leave that to me. John Dodge won't dare to try—" The remaining words were lost.

"Trust him to feather his nest," were the next words heard by the listener.

"Yes, yes;—there, let me alone now, Felix, I've got my letter to write."

In a moment more the observant messenger saw the gentleman leave the room, closing the door behind him.

"That's all," said Frank to himself. "But if there ain't a nigger in the wood-pile, I don't know beans. I can see the darky's heel sticking out—I wonder if Dick is on this! Anyhow, I'll jot down what I've heard, for my memory's gone wrong lately."

He produced a memorandum-book, and wrote down the scraps of conversation for future reference.

"Now for the picture room.—I'd give my best boots to see that woman Dick was talking to t'other night, but I can't go hunting through the house, so I'll take the pictures instead.—Maybe she'll turn up before I leave."

Replacing the book carefully in his pocket, Frank entered the room to which he had been directed.

It was fitted up as a picture gallery, the walls being hung with numerous landscape and figure pieces, not from the first artists, yet well selected.

Frank, whose experience of fine paintings was not extensive, went round the gallery with much pleasure, enjoying the bad with as much zest as the good, if the subject pleased him.

At the lower end of the room hung a number of family portraits.

"That's Mrs. Marchman," he said, looking at

one. "She's ten years younger than to-day, and mighty good-looking. She holds her own mighty well, though.—This is Mr. Marchman. He looks like a squeezed-out turnip-top. Queer that woman picked up such a guy. And here's—whew!" He whistled in great surprise. "By Jiminy, what was wrong with my brains, that I couldn't catch it sooner? It's the woman that Dick Wister talked to on the steps;—and if it ain't my old sweetheart Alice Walsh, you can boil me for a lobster."

Frank broke into a dance of joy at his discovery, which seemed to throw him into a fever of excitement.

"Alice Walsh!—Dainty little Alice!—The girl I fell in love with at sight—and haven't seen for a year!" he ejaculated. "But what is she doing here? And what did Dick Wister want with her? And what's all that about her guardian?—Alice mixed in this. Then there's something for me to find out, now you bet!"

His soliloquy was interrupted in an unexpected manner. For at that moment the door of the room opened and a person entered, who started back on perceiving that the apartment was occupied by a stranger.

Frank turned quickly, and saw before him one of the loveliest faces he had ever beheld—that of a simply but tastefully dressed young lady of some nineteen or twenty years of age.

"Alice!" he cried. "Frank Melton! you here!" the surprise in her face changed into a charming smile.

"Where have you been all these years?" "Where have you been? you know you promised—"

They had clasped hands like old friends, but started apart at this moment, on hearing footsteps in the hall outside.

"Don't say anything," whispered Frank quickly. "I'll see you again."

The door opened and Mrs. Marchman entered.

"Here is the answer, young man. Be sure you deliver it only to Mr. Dodge," she said.—"Alice! you here!"

"Yes, Mrs. Marchman. I came for my crocheting, which I thought I left here yesterday. Did you see it?"

"No. It would be hard to follow up your careless fingers, child.—That will do, boy. Make haste back."

"Very well, ma'am." Frank did make haste, but not just the kind of haste she intended. On reaching the street he hastened to the office of Smith & Wister, detectives, instead of to the store of Dodge & Halfish, silk merchants.

He found Dick alone. "Well?" he asked, looking up at the boy.

"What sort of a shady concern is Number—Fifth avenue?" asked Frank.

Dick uttered a hasty exclamation. "What in the blazes do you know about Number—Fifth avenue?"

Dick laughed knowingly. "More than you think, maybe," he answered. "I've just been there with a letter from Mr. Dodge to Mrs. Marchman. This is her answer."

He drew the letter from his pocket. Dick took it from his hand and looked at it closely.

"Well?" he asked. "This is not the only letter you have carried; why do you bring this one to me?"

"I thought maybe our 'aw—aw' Englisher might like to know—"

"Ha! you cub! you followed me that night!" interrupted Dick, sharply. "You are too confounded spry, you imp of Satan!—Well, what have you picked up?"

"I've run afoul of my old sweetheart, Alice Walsh."

"Whom you didn't love enough to keep an eye on."

"And I've learned that there is something shady between old Dodge and Mrs. Marchman. It isn't polite to listen, but I listened, and picked up this."

He showed Dick the entries in the memorandum-book.

"Ha! you did listen to some purpose. You've earned a big apple, Frank, and there's one on the table. Wait, I'll be back soon."

He left the room with the letter in his hand, and was absent some ten minutes. On his return he handed Frank the missive.

"Now be off, you loitering rascal. If Mr. Dodge knew you stopped to play on the way—" He laughed significantly.

"You're on it?" asked Frank.

"No—but I'm getting there."

"Good-by, then." He shot out briskly, and made the best of his way back to the store.

CHAPTER V.

NEW AND OLD FRIENDS.

In one of the suburban streets of Brooklyn, stood a small but tasteful house, well-covered in front with climbing plants, with which the pillars of its small porch was thickly entwined. In front and at the side stretched a green lawn, with beds of chrysanthemums, now in full bloom.

It was at the door of this house that Frank Melton knocked, several days after that of the events described in the last chapter.

There came to the door in response, a young woman, of pretty, but sadly troubled face. She seemed, indeed, to have been recently crying, there being marks of tears still on her cheeks. Clinging to her skirts was a group of three children, who seemed from six years of age downward.

She held the door with her hand, looking at him inquiringly.

"I hope you have not been worried, Mrs. Brown," began Frank. "I—"

"Oh, do you bring me word?" she broke out eagerly. "He did not come home last night! He—"

"He is all right," interrupted Frank. "He was sent yesterday afternoon on business to Philadelphia, and hadn't time to get home first."

"But why didn't he send me word? I have been so anxious. I should have been to the store, but couldn't leave home on account of the little ones."

"It is not his fault, Mrs. Brown. Mr. Dodge promised to, and forgot. He has sent me over this morning. Here is a note from him."

"Forgot!—If it had been his wife waiting!—But do come in; I'm so impolite. Be kind enough to take a seat while I read Mr. Dodge's note."

Frank followed her into a very prettily furnished parlor, and seated himself on a sofa, where in a few moments he was surrounded by the three children. He had much of that faculty which attracts the young, and very quickly had the three rioting over him, as friendly as if they had known him since infancy.

"Georgey, I'm ashamed of you!" cried Mrs. Brown. "Come away now!—Oh dear, sir, they are annoying you dreadfully."

"Not a bit of it, Mrs. Brown. It's just what I like. I'm a good deal of a baby myself yet, you know."

"A good big one," she smiled in reply. All the trouble had left her face. "I find it is all right about Harry, and I've been worrying for nothing.—But Mr. Dodge shouldn't have forgotten."

"Indeed he shouldn't," answered Frank, tossing a crowding toddler into the air and catching him as he descended. "Though I suppose it's nothing new for him to be out late."

"But not all night," she quickly responded. "Business sometimes keeps him till midnight; but he never before stayed all night without sending me word."

"Business!" said Frank to himself, as he danced the six-year-old on his knee. "Queer business, I'm afraid.—So he's a midnight owl, eh?"

"I'm glad it's all right, Mrs. Brown," he continued.

"If you'll excuse me a few minutes, I'll write Mr. Dodge an answer."

"All right, Mrs. Brown. I'll take care of the young ones while you're doing it—or let them take care of me."

"Don't let them trouble you too much," she remarked, looking on with a smile.

"Trouble me? Why, this is better than baseball!" answered Frank, cheerily, as he rolled the crowding and laughing youngsters over one another on the sofa.

In such a rollicking frolic did he get with them, indeed, that he failed to hear the door open a few minutes afterward, and some one enter. It was not till a silvery laugh broke on the air that he became aware that he was not alone with his youthful playmates.

"That's not Mrs. Brown," he cried, looking up quickly. "Ah! Alice Walsh!—Well, I declare! What brings you here?"

"Well, I declare! What brings you here?" she laughingly replied.

"Business!" he answered.

"Friendship!" she rejoined.

"You know Mrs. Brown, then?"

"I should think so. We are old schoolmates."

—But you seem fully at home here."

"Well, I should say! It don't take me long to get at home with young ones. You and I weren't long in getting acquainted, you know."

"We weren't such young folks then," she an-

stered, seating herself and taking one of the children in her lap.

"I don't think we're such old folks now," he laughingly replied. "Don't be putting on airs, Alice; you're only a grown-up girl."

"And you a grown-up boy."

Her merry laugh rung through the room.

"I think I am more of a girl than I was then, Frank; for I had much to trouble me at that time."

"I should say so! That rascal Clarkson—But that's all past now. Your father is dead; you are an heiress, and have got a guardian.—Who is your guardian, Alice?"

"Who? Why, Mr. Dodge, of the firm of Dodge & Halfish."

"Whew!" Frank whistled, meaningly.

"What is the matter?" she asked, anxiously.

"Oh, nothing.—It's them I'm with now, Alice. I'm their messenger-boy."

"Are you? I'm glad of that. Then you are out of that unpleasant detective business!"

"Out of it!" He laughed. "Well, not quite.—But how came old Dodge to be your guardian?"

"Why, he was chosen through my mother's friend, Mrs. Marchman, whom I live with.—Do you know anything wrong about him?"

"Nothing.—But I wish he hadn't your money.—Do you know George Dodge?"

"You do know something, Frank," she broke out earnestly. "I have been worried myself. Mr. Dodge visits Mrs. Marchman in her husband's absence, and there are things I don't like.—And Mr. Enderby, the odd Englishman who called on me and asked me questions about my guardian and would tell me nothing.—And now you.—I wish I knew what it all means. You might tell me, Frank. We're old friends, you know."

"Old sweethearts," answered Frank, with a gay laugh. "Well, I don't know anything, so I can't tell you anything. But if I were you I'd ask my lawyer to look into the matter, and see if my money was all right."

"I will," she replied gratefully. "I didn't think of that."

"I may have some points for your lawyer before long," he continued. "I'm a little bit of a detective yet, Alice."

At this point they were interrupted by the return of Mrs. Brown, with the note she had written in her hand. She paused at the door and looked in surprise at the group on the sofa.

"Alice!" she exclaimed. "Why, is it possible that you two know each other?"

"We are old friends," answered Alice smilingly. "You have often heard me speak of my boy friend and protector, Frank Melton."

"Indeed I have! Is this Frank Melton?"

"Then you don't know him?"

"I have just made the acquaintance of the family," said Frank, "and am only intimate with the younger members." He rolled the children together on the sofa as he spoke. "Have you your answer ready, Mrs. Brown?"

"Yes. Here it is."

"Then I must be hurrying back."

"Must you? Will you not stay and take some refreshment first?—Do keep him, Alice, while I get something."

She hastened from the room, followed by the two older children. The youngest was cozily nestled in Alice's lap. She and Frank sat looking at each other pleasantly. The meeting was a great enjoyment to them both.

"You ask me if I know Mr. George Dodge," she at length said.

"Yes.—Do you know him?"

"Somewhat too well. He is one of my visiting acquaintances, and—I wish he was not."

"Why?"

"Ob, I don't know. He annoys me."

"Does he? I'll punch his head," cried Frank, impulsively.

"No you won't," she replied, laughing. "Leave him alone. Mr. Dodge is one of my—lovers I believe they call them."

"Him!—That laughing hyena! I'll—"

"No you won't, I say." She spoke firmly. "He is wasting his time, Frank. I don't like him."

"You've got no right to any lovers. You're my sweetheart, you know."

Her silvery laugh rung through the room.

"I haven't forgot," she said, in a tone of amusement. "As for George Dodge—"

"Why don't you like him?" interrupted Frank.

"How can I tell that? It is instinct, I suppose. He is a genial, light-hearted society man; the best of social company. I ought to like him, no doubt; but I can't."

"But there is something more."

"I don't believe the man is honest," she an-

swered. "His open gayety seems to me like a sham. I don't trust him. He seems as open as a stream, but I think him as deep as a well."

"Is this all feeling? Do you know anything?"

"Nothing."

"And old Mr. Dodge visits Mrs. Marchman?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever heard their conversation, Alice? Do you remember anything they said?"

"No."

"I wish you would."

"Would what? play the spy?" She looked at him with reproachful eyes.

"The detective only. It may be that the fate of your money depends on it."

"Does it?" she answered, coldly. "Let it, then. I would rather lose it all than do anything dishonorable."

"Oh!—Well, suppose we drop that. I am coming some time soon to see you, Alice."

"I wish you would, Frank."

Mrs. Brown returned at this moment, bearing in her hand a waiter with a plate of cakes and two glasses of lemonade.

"I hope you are not tired waiting," she asked.

"Not at all. We have just begun to talk over old times."

They helped themselves to the refreshments, and continued their conversation, Mrs. Brown joining in.

"There, I must be away now," said Frank, after an interval. "Mr. Dodge will be timing me. I didn't know what a variety of refreshments I was to get in your house, Mrs. Brown."

"You seem to have enjoyed them all."

In five minutes more Frank was on his way back to the ferry, feeling that he had spent an hour in both an agreeable and profitable manner.

CHAPTER VI.

FRANK IN A RAT'S DWELLING.

"New developments, Frank," said Dick Wister, when the young spy called at the detectives' office a few days later. "Fresh robberies. Have you heard?"

"No. All's moving at the store as salubrious as original sin."

"Not a bit of it, my boy. There is a roll of valuable silks missing, and not the ghost of the shadow of a trace. The thief, whoever he is, is as cunning as ten foxes. Have you learned nothing?"

"No," answered Frank, gloomily. "Hang 'em all, they didn't tell me a word about it.—But I'm going to," he exclaimed, after a minute. "That slink-by-night ain't going to shut up my peepers, not if the court knows herself."

"How about the man you suspected, Harry Brown?"

"Why, he has been away on business at Philadelphia these three days. Only got back late yesterday. You'd thought he hardly had time to work up a slip-'em-out game in that time."

"I am not so sure of that," answered Dick, shaking his head. "It may have struck him as just the time to clear him of any possible suspicion. He stayed late, reporting the results of his errand, and all the people were out of the store when he left."

"There mought be something in that," said Frank reflectively. "I don't know how it is," he continued; "everything looks black for that man; but somehow I don't believe he's the thief."

"Why?" Dick looked up inquiringly.

"I can't say. He's got a mighty nice little woman for a wife, and three dear little roly-poly kids of kids."

"And is that the reason he can't steal?" Dick laughed in great amusement. "Come, boy, don't you know human nature better than that?"

"I can't get it into my gizzard that he's the one," rejoined the boy stubbornly. "I don't believe we're half way to the bottom of this thing yet.—But I'm goin' to get there. I've bout got my foundations laid. Now I'm going to build my edifice."

"Go ahead, Frank. We are working up our end of the business, but much depends on your observations."

Frank walked away in a brown study. He was revolving in his mind a course of action, and during the remainder of that day was so quiet that scarce a word could be got from him.

By that evening's mail Frank's mother received a letter directed in his handwriting. On opening it, she found a broad sheet containing only these words:

"I won't be home to-night. Business."

"FRANK."

"Business! That's just like Frank!" broke

out the good woman. "When there's nothing to tell he's as wordy as a dictionary; but when there's something one'd like to know he's dumb as a bronze figure.—Business! I'd like to shake him."

She went about her work with an excited vim that set every pot and pan in her kitchen rattling like castanets.

When the store of Dodge & Halffish closed that day for its night rest, all its late occupants were not out. Coiled away in a nook in the basement, in a heap of loose wrapping papers that half buried him, lay the motionless form of Frank Melton.

He was to all appearance fast asleep. If any one had seen him there they would have supposed that he had dropped off into slumber for lack of anything better to do. But no one saw him, and none missed him, and when the key was turned in the front-door lock the youthful spy remained a prisoner in the store.

The loud click of the key reached even to the boy's ears. As if it had been a signal, he sprang to his feet as wide awake as he ever had been in his life.

"It's amazingly dark here," he said, striving in vain to look around him.—"Wonder if there's any rats 'bout these diggings! I never could bear rats.—Maybe there's some two-legged ones.—I'm in for it anyhow, and I've got to go the whole job—root hog or die."

It was indeed very dark. The short November day was at an end outside, and lights were burning in the street. But no glimmer from them reached the boy's retreat, every light had been extinguished in the store, and the gloom around him seemed black enough to be cut.

"I wish I'd bid up-stairs," he grumbled. "I've got to get out of this basement and I know I'll break ten ribs in doing it. It looks as if twenty hogsheads of black paint had been poured out on the floor."

He knew in what part of the basement he was, and the general direction of the stairway, but—there was a very big "but" in the way of reaching it. The floor was covered with boxes and heaps of goods, and the route leading to the stairs promised to be anything but an easy one.

Laying his course for the stairway as well as he could in the blank darkness, Frank started, advancing very slowly, and doing his best to keep in a straight line.

He had not taken ten steps before he came plump against a box. This he carefully climbed over, feeling the bearings of its sides, and continuing his course. The next obstruction was a heap of goods packages, over which he half fell. These, too, he surmounted and went on, meeting new obstacles at almost every step.

"I ought to be there now," he considered. "I've gone far enough, mercy knows. And I'm sure I've come straight as a die. Can't fool me; I know how to navigate in the dark."

As he spoke these last words his nose came plump against an obstruction that made him see stars, and brought some very decided opinions from his lips. He thrust out both hands, and felt a range of shelving that he knew to be twenty feet from the stairs.

"How in the thunder did I ever get here?" he ejaculated. "Going straight! Why, I'll be fizzled if I haven't made a complete circle, and come out further off than I started."

Taking the shelving as a new starting-point, the adventurous boy set off on another journey for the stairs, but with much less confidence than before. His belief in his ability to lay a straight course in the dark had been rudely shaken by his late experience.

On he went through the midnight gloom, more slowly than before, and trying to make every obstacle he came upon a new point of departure. He felt sure he had it this time; but what was his surprise and disappointment, after a few minutes, to find that devoted nose of his come plump against a stone wall. He had reached the rear of the basement, full thirty feet away from the stairs.

Frank's opinion of the situation was now expressed in words which would have made a decided sensation in a Sunday-School. He was not given to swearing, but felt that no ordinary language would square with the difficulty.

"Blame my eyes, if sly-fingers mightn't run off with all the goods in the store while I'm getting out of the basement!" he ejaculated. "I hope there's no rats here, for if there are I'm doomed to be their prey. I'll be nothing but a bundle of bones by morning.—I ought to be, too; to think I was such a pumpkin-headed fool as to come here without any matches in my pocket!"

He ceased speaking. Another idea had come into his head. The stairway ran up beside the

wall. Why not follow the walls round till he reached it?

This luminous idea gave him the highest satisfaction, and he immediately put it in practice. Touching the wall with his left hand as he walked, and feeling before him with each foot, before taking a step, he slowly progressed, making the round of the walls, and the shelving which in places covered them.

By daylight this route would not have been more than a hundred feet, but by night Frank was sure it had stretched out to fully five miles. And the minute or two it would have taken in daylight, seemed to him extended into a long hour.

A great sigh of relief came from his lips when his foot came plump against the lower step, and he felt that he had accomplished his mission at last.

"Who'd ever thought it was so far?" he said. "Talk about your Mammoth Cave—it's only a hole in the ground alongside this cellar.—And if anybody catches me here without matches again, they can sell my thick hide to cover footballs."

All was straight sailing now. The stairway lay before him, and though it was like plunging into midnight gloom, feeling took the place of seeing, and he quickly made his way up the stairs.

Reaching the main floor of the store, the difficulty vanished. It was still very dark, but the light from the gas-lamp in the street found some cracks for entrance, while the straight counters that ran the full length of the floor served as guides.

But it mattered little to Frank now where he was. He was there as a spy, and could do his work as well in one part of the store as another.

He had come to the full conclusion that the thief did his work at night, having some means of entrance, and it was his aim to lurk there night after night until he caught the fellow in the act.

As the adventurous boy stood thus cogitating, he got a start that brought his heart into his throat. The front-door lock clicked, its sound striking through the dead silence so loudly that it seemed to the excited listener like the report of a cannon.

"Coming already?" he ejaculated. "Thunder!—where'll I get?"

There was little time to get anywhere, for the opening of the door followed quickly upon the click of the lock, and the light of street-lamps poured through the opening.

Frank hastily plunged under the counter beside which he stood. In the momentary glimpse which he had caught, he had seen the form of a man outlined in the lamp-light.

The next instant the door closed, and all was dark again.

But this was only for a moment. There came the scratching sound of a match, a flash of light, and a steady blaze as of a lighted candle.

The spy crouched low as footsteps came up the long floor, treading lightly, while the moving light of the candle flashed weirdly over walls and counters.

The boy listened intently. He did not venture to raise his head yet, and had only his hearing to depend on. His heart was beating like a trip-hammer from excitement, and each low step came with a sledge-like sound to his ears.

"By thunder, he's gone into the office!" cried Frank to himself, his ears tracing the steps. "What does he want there?"

The spy now ventured to rise and look hopefully over the top of the counter. The intruder had disappeared, but the gleam of his candle shone through the open door of the outer office.

Frank advanced noiselessly, letting each foot fall like a feather. He was eager to see who it was that had paid this clandestine visit to the store. The solution of the whole mystery might lie in this.

There came the sound of the opening and closing of a door, and the light disappeared. Frank stood thunderstruck.

"He's in the private office!" he ejaculated. "What the tarnation is up now? There's no silks or laces there; and no money either. Who is it, and what in the wide world is he after?"

The boy's curiosity was intensely aroused. He was ready to risk almost any danger to discover who this interloper might be, and advanced into the outer office with the most cautious tread.

The light had been cut off except a narrow gleam that came through the keyhole of the door of the inner office. This door was closed.

Frank advanced on tip-toe toward it, kneeled down, and glued his eye to the keyhole, hoping to see the form of the intruder.

He was disappointed. The man was at the side of the office, out of the line of vision. Frank waited for five minutes, hoping he would move, but in vain. No sound came from within except a faint rustling of paper, and an occasional low sound, as if the intruder was muttering to himself.

"Well, this dashes me!" said Frank forcibly to himself. "What under the sun can he be at? And who can he be? This don't look like a silk thief. There's some deeper game afoot.—Ah! I have it. There's that glass eye-hole on the other side of the office, which they use to look out in the store. I'll use it to look in."

He withdrew as cautiously as he had come, leaving the office, and feeling his way along its side. Reaching the corner, he saw what he was in search of. A ray of light came through a single pane of glass, in the side of the private office.

The alert boy was not long in reaching this, in laying a thick roll of goods on the floor, and in mounting on it so as to lift his eyes to the level of the glass.

A single peep through, and he had the information he so anxiously desired. There, by an office table, with a heavy blank book open before him, over which he was intently poring, sat the senior member of the firm, Mr. John Dodge! Some deep rascality was afoot.

CHAPTER VII.

MR. DODGE'S METHOD OF BOOKKEEPING.

"Two hundred dollars to tell where the stuff went. That's what old Dodge promised," said the youthful spy to himself, as he continued to watch the strange proceedings in the office. "If I ain't badly mistook he'll pay it out of his own pocket. What the thunder is the gray old coon at, anyhow?"

Was Frank mistaken? Had the senior member of the firm returned only to examine the books and trace some possible fraud in the office? —No.—His purpose was deeper than this. As the boy watched him with intense curiosity he saw him take a penknife from his pocket, open the blade, and with the aid of a long ruler cut out a page deftly from the account book he had been examining.

The looker-on gave a sigh of satisfaction.

"'Tain't no shallow game he's playing," he soliloquized. "The old rascal's stocking the cards ag'in' his partner;—but I hold the joker, and I'm going to sweep his trumps when it's my play."

A number of leaves were turned, and then a second page cut out in the same careful manner.

This process went on until half a dozen pages had been removed from the book, and lay on the table beside it.

The secret conspirator now rose from the cramped position in which he had been sitting, and stretched himself with a grunt of satisfaction.

"So far, well," he said. "Now to finish my task."

On the table lay a thin portfolio, which he had brought with him. Opening this, he took from it several pages of the same size as those he had removed from the book. From these he carefully selected one, and turned the leaves of the book back to the first cut page.

A narrow margin had been left. This he spread with an adhesive liquid, and laid the edge of the page carefully upon it, pressing it skillfully down.

Even from where Frank stood he could perceive that the work was neatly done. It would take a sharp eye to detect the cheat.

"Blame my top-knot!" thought the observant boy, "if he ain't putting in extra pages, with false accounts on them. He's laying it out to shut up old Halfish's optics. My eyes, if he knew I was here he'd murder me! As sure as you live. I'm in it—deep."

Waiting until the thin layer of glue had dried, Mr. Dodge turned to the second cut leaf, and treated it in the same manner. And thus he continued until they had all been replaced with false pages, which, from where he stood, the sharp-eyed observer could see were covered with written figures.

Considerably more than an hour had passed by the time the work was completed. It had been done with such extreme care that much time was necessary. At the end the treacherous merchant rose and looked on the result of his labors with intense satisfaction.

"It's rough on old Parsons, but there's got to be some scapegoat," he said aloud. "Funds

are found to be short—we are not able to meet our notes—search proves that we have been robbed—two hundred thousand gone to the dogs—the books are examined—false entries found—Parsons has been robbing us—to prison the old scape-goat goes—and Dodge dodges the responsibility." He laughed with the tone of a Mephistopheles.

"Somebody has got to stand from under, for the business will soon be on its last legs," he continued. "I choose it to be me instead of Halfish. Every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost, that's my motto."

Closing the book, he carried it to the outer office and replaced it on the shelf from which he had taken it. He then returned and stood looking on the pages he had cut from the book.

"How to dispose of these is the next question," he considered. "If I burn them here the ashes may seem suspicious. If I take them away with me some accident may lead to their discovery. It will be much the safest plan to conceal them for the night and take a quiet opportunity to destroy them to-morrow."

He looked around him, and stood as if deliberating. Finally he turned to the desk on which he had been working, and which had a row of drawers extending to the floor. Taking a bunch of keys from an upper drawer, he unlocked and opened the lower drawer. It was filled to the top with papers.

He now turned, picked up the cut leaves, and folded them into a small package, which he placed in a long envelope. Sealing this, he thrust it under the heap of papers.

"That's better," he said to himself, as he locked the drawer and placed the keys in his pocket. "Halfish never thinks of opening this drawer, and nobody else can. It may be well not to destroy those pages yet. Affairs might take one of those odd turns in which it might be useful to have them in existence. I will wait and see what turns up."

With these words, he replaced his hat on his head, took up the candle and left the office, shutting the door behind him.

Frank, who was now crouching on the floor, behind a pile of goods, watched the light as it moved quickly down the floor. Evidently Mr. Dodge had completed his work, and was about to depart.

The spy rose so as to watch him more closely. He was not sure yet but that he might see him go out with a roll of silks under his arm.

No; there was nothing there but the portfolio. Mr. Dodge extinguished the candle, placed it in a receptacle near the door, and again unlocked the portal, to which he seemed to possess a duplicate key.

In a minute more he was gone, and the door locked behind him. The young detective was once more alone.

"I wonder if it's a ghost I've seen," he said to himself. "I reckon I'd best pinch myself to see if I'm awake.—Ouch!—Yes, I ain't asleep, and this wasn't nobody's ghost, but a live flesh and blood rascal, that's got deviltry enough in him to fill a jail."

Frank walked up and down the dark floor, thinking what he had best do next. He felt sure that he was at an end of his adventures for that night. But he was locked fast in the store, and might as well try and employ his time profitably.

"I might slip back the bolt of a window, and get out in that way," he thought. "But an open shutter looks suspicious, and I don't want to raise no suspicion.—And, by gum, I'd like to have that lot of leaves amazing. Why didn't he leave the keys? There weren't any use in carrying them off."

The idea was worth carrying out. Something might come of it. The faint light from the front of the store broke the depth of the darkness where he stood, and enabled him to make his way about with some safety.

By its aid he entered the office, and groped along the desks till he gained the door of the private office. He knew what he was about; a match-safe hung near this door, and he remembered its exact locality.

Feeling carefully, he soon had his fingers on it, and some of the matches shifted from the safe into his pocket.

He now entered the inner office boldly. Here he struck a match, by whose light the whole interior was illuminated. Before him stood the desk in whose lower drawer the cut leaves had been concealed.

Kneeling, he attempted to open this drawer, hoping that Mr. Dodge had failed to lock it. He was mistaken; it was safely secured.

He next tried the drawer above. If that were loose he could take it out, and reach the

lower drawer from the opening. To his disappointment it was also locked.

"Dished!" he muttered to himself. "Old Dodge has got me this time; but I'm bound to handle those papers."

Lighting another match, he searched around the office, hoping to find another bunch of keys, one of which might open the closed drawer.

Here, too, he was disappointed. Not a key was to be found.

"Them papers are good till to-morrow," he soliloquized. "From what the old rogue said he won't be in no hurry to get rid of them.—But he might change his mind any day, and I ain't taking no chances.—Wonder if I'd best put Dick Wister on it; or let it out to Mr. Halfish.—Don't know about that. Dick sort o' thinks I'm a slow goer, and I'd like to let him see I know a thing or two."

Picking up the burnt matches, he put them in his pocket, not caring to leave such suspicious indications on the floor. Then he seated himself comfortably in Mr. Halfish's easy-chair, with his feet on the table, and set himself to deep thought as to what he had best do in the situation.

His thought soon became very deep; his eyes closed; a peculiar sound came from his nose;—the boy was fast asleep. Worn out by his exertions and excitement of the last hour or two, Nature had asserted her power over his senses, and slumber taken possession of his frame.

How long Frank slept it would have been hard for him to tell. His couch was anything but an easy one, but he slumbered there as soundly as if he had been in a bed of eider down, and the minutes and hours slipped over him unheeded.

He awoke at length with a sudden start.—What was it? Voices were audible near him. The gleam of a light came through the glass window of the office. The boy rubbed his eyes. For several minutes he did not know where he was.

But the vision of familiar objects soon recalled him to himself. He recognized the furniture of Dodge & Halfish's office, and with this a full recollection of the situation returned to him.

What did this mean—the light and those voices? Was the late visitor returning? If so the spy's situation was a dangerous one.—But these were distinct voices. There must be more than one person. Mr. Dodge would have come alone. It could not be he, but it might be the silk thieves! Frank felt himself on the verge of a discovery.

He rose cautiously, tiptoed to the square of glass through which he had recently looked into the office, and looked out.

Yes, there were two persons, one of them bearing the candle which Mr. Dodge had used. Their backs were turned to the boy, but he knew them at sight. The clandestine visitors were the two whom he had before seen under suspicious circumstances—George Dodge and Harry Brown.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE END OF AN EVENTFUL NIGHT.

THE two young men whom Frank Melton had discovered under such suspicious circumstances, seemed engaged in deep conversation. Their words failed to reach his ears, but the distant sound of voices came to his hearing. George was seated easily on one of the store counters holding the candle in his right hand. Harry stood near him, with bent head and shoulders, and in what seemed a drooping attitude.

The boy stood watching them for some time, curious to learn what actions would follow their conversation. But as they continued to talk, he grew impatient, and resolved to take some risk to learn what they were about.

Were they there as partners in theft? That he could scarcely believe. Certainly the son of the proprietor had no occasion to steal from his father. Everybody in the store knew that George Dodge received an ample salary for his services.

But Harry Brown was not paid nearly so well, and had the expenses of a family. More than that, he was a gambler.—Ah! that was it. George Dodge was proving his friend as he had before, and secretly saving him from theft as he had from gambling.

Such was the theory that sprung into Frank's mind. It seemed the natural one under the circumstances, yet somehow he was not quite satisfied with it. Could the husband of that lovely woman, and the father of those pretty children, be a common thief?

"I ain't going to believe it without more

proof," declared Frank, "even if Joe Smith or Dick Wister would call me a soft-head."

The quick-witted boy was not long in deciding what to do. Cautiously leaving the office, he reached the door of the outer room, where he carefully stretched himself on the floor, and began a noiseless creeping process toward the two store-breakers.

As he drew near some words of their conversation came to his ears, mingled with occasional sounds of laughter from George Dodge who for some reason seemed highly amused. It was the same peculiar, mirthless, satirical laugh which the boy had heard before, in the gambling saloon.

Five minutes of this noiseless worming of his body along the edge of the counter brought Frank into sufficient nearness to hear their conversation easily. He had paid little attention to the words that reached his ears during his advance, but he now ceased his progress, dropped prone to the floor, and prepared to listen intently to their words.

He deemed himself on the verge of a solution of the mystery which had puzzled proprietors and detectives alike. Surely the next few sentences, spoken without thought of a listener, would reveal the secret.

Yet Frank had unluckily come a few minutes too late. Just as he reached his lurking point, George Dodge sprung from his seat on the counter to the floor.

"Well," he said cheerfully, "the job's done for to-night, anyhow. I judge you don't feel like dealing in silks and laces now, eh, Harry? How would you like to buck the tiger awhile? It might pay as well as handling dry goods."

He laughed as he ceased, in that disagreeable fashion which so grated on Frank's ears.

"Perhaps I had better go home," answered Harry quietly. "As you say, the job is over for to-night."

"It is too much, as you wisely said," remarked George lightly, "to handle silks night and day. I'd give up the night work, if I were you. It's so dashed unhandy for me to spend every night racing on your track."

"Come, George, we had better go," answered Harry in a tone of deep gloom. He seemed thoroughly depressed. "Enough has been said, and I trust this will be the last time."

"Faith, I hope so. I wouldn't like to be caught here—with you. It would look dashed bad."

Harry made no answer, but started down the floor, followed by his companion. No more words passed between them while in Frank's hearing, but that peculiar laugh of George Dodge came back to his ears with a strangely grating effect.

"Hang him!" growled the boy. "That laugh is just as if he'd run a knife into a chap, and twisted it round. I don't like it, nohow."

In a few seconds more the youthful spy had the store once more to himself. The click of the lock told him that the door was again fastened, and that he was alone in that great building.

The night had been an eventful one, and he had learned several secrets of importance. Yet, as he felt, nothing had been clearly learned, a cloud remained over all.

He was not well enough versed in business matters to understand the full import of Mr. John Dodge's secret operations, but had heard enough to satisfy him that a big haul of the firm's funds was intended, and that the blame of the robbery was to be thrown upon an innocent clerk named Parsons.

As to Harry Brown and George Dodge, he was at a loss what to think. He could hardly doubt now that Harry was the silk thief, and that his friend had tracked him to the store and checked him in the very act.

But that laugh!—that mirthless, impish, torturing laugh!—It affected him, as he had said, like a knife thrust into his flesh and twisted in the wound. What was he to think of a man who could laugh like that? Was Harry a Faust and George a Mephistopheles?

Full of such thoughts, the boy seated himself cozily on a pile of goods packages, where he kept himself awake for an hour or two, ready for the possibility of some further adventure.

At the end of that time, however, sleep again overcame him, he sunk down at full length on the goods, with a roll of costly silks for a pillow, and was soon deeply gone in the land of nod.

Hour after hour passed away. Out of doors the night glided by, and the stars faded out in the sky before the twilight prelude to a new day. In time full day dawned, the street awakened, early wayfarers moved past, the distant rumble of wheels was audible.

At length, one of the early comers stopped

before the door of Dodge & Halfish, inserted a key in the front lock, and opened it with that sharp click which Frank had heard more than once during the past night.

The sound again reached his ears, where he lay in a morning doze. He sprung up quickly, saw that daylight had invaded the store, and dropped again as he saw a person entering through the front door.

The now wide-awake boy guessed quickly what had happened. He had slept the night away, and the store was about to be opened for the next day's business.

He must not be seen. The porter was now engaged in opening the windows, and Frank took advantage of the opportunity to steal across the floor, stooping below the level of the counters, till he gained the top of the flight of stairs leading to the basement.

Down these he went to the lower floor, which he found to present a very different appearance from when he last left it. Then it was of midnight blackness; now the light of day stole everywhere through it.

The cunning fugitive sought the heap of waste papers in which he had hidden on the evening before, and again buried himself under this shelter. It was his plan not to make his appearance until the employees were generally present.

Gradually they came, now one by one, now several together. In good time the most of them were present, and the customary sounds of business again filled the ample edifice.

The concealed spy now looked out through the mask of the papers about him. The only man in sight of his covert had his back turned. He crept out, shook the papers from him, and moved cautiously to the foot of the stairs, keeping out of sight. In a moment more he was on the main floor of the store.

"Early to-day, youngster," said one of the older salesmen. "I thought you were one of those luxurious nine o'clockers."

"Didn't sleep well last night," answered Frank. "Had something that lay heavy on my conscience."

"Or your stomach," laughed the salesman. "There's where the conscience lays, with boys like you."

"Oh! bless your heart, I could eat tenpenny nails, if my teeth were sharp enough," retorted Frank.

An hour afterward found him in the private office. Mr. Dodge had not yet made his appearance, but Mr. Halfish had been there, and had gone out again.

Frank had watched him. He had been at the desk in which the boy was now so vitally interested. Possibly he had unlocked it.

Frank hastened to try the drawer in which the sealed envelope had been placed. It was still fast. He next tried the drawer above it. This yielded to his hand. Mr. Halfish had unlocked it, and left it so.

Now might be the opportunity desired. By taking out the drawer completely, access could be had to the drawer below, there being no partition between them.

But it was safest first to provide against possible interruption. The astute boy walked to the outer office, and asked a clerk:

"Did Mr. Halfish say how soon he would be back?"

"Said he might be gone an hour," was the short answer.

"All right. I'm to wait for him."

Frank returned to the private office, taking care to close the door securely behind him. Reaching there, he obtained one of the long envelopes which Mr. Dodge had used the night before, and folding some blank sheets of paper, thrust them in, so as to make a package of the proper thickness. This done, he sealed the envelope.

His next proceeding was to pull out the drawer over that which he wished to reach, and set it on the floor. Now, thrusting down his arm, he reached the papers in the drawer below. Feeling under these at the corner where the package had been bidden, he quickly had the satisfaction of holding it in his hand. A minute more sufficed to place the counterfeit package in the same place and smooth the papers over it.

"So far good," said Frank triumphantly to himself. "It's my notion that I've got the bulge heavy on Mr. John Dodge.—There's only one thing to do to finish the job."

This was to replace the drawer. He lifted it from the floor and slipped it into its place. But the awkward thing stuck, as drawers have a fashion of doing, and refused to close.

Frank pushed and pulled at it till he was in a perspiration. It took him some time to overcome the difficulty and get the drawer in a slid-

ing humor again. Unluckily, just at that moment the door of the office sharply opened, and Mr. Halfish appeared.

He looked at the boy with contracted brows, and exclaimed in a tone of displeasure:

"What are you doing with that drawer? Who gave you the privilege to meddle with our private papers?"

The boy had started sharply, on hearing the opening door, but he quickly regained his presence of mind, and pushed the now tractable drawer into its place.

Then he rose and faced the angry proprietor. The package was still in his hand.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Halfish," he said. "I know I have no right among your papers, but I have not touched any of them, but only took a package of my own out of the drawer."

"Can't you find any place but my drawers to keep your papers in?"

"Why that was my purpose. I thought it had no business there, and took it out again. I wish you would be kind enough to take care of it for me, Mr. Halfish."

"What is it, boy?" asked Mr. Halfish, taking the envelope from his hand.

"Some papers of a good deal of importance," answered Frank. "Private ones, which I've no good place to keep. It just struck me your drawer was not a safe place for them, so I took them out."

"It's queer what odd notions boys take," rejoined Mr. Halfish, in a more pleasant tone. "I'm to take care of them, then? Very well."

He wrote on the envelope: "Private papers of Frank Melton," and thrust it into a drawer in his private desk.

"Will that do, Frank?"

"First-rate, sir. Much obliged. I may want those papers before long; and I calculate to show you then that they're mighty important."

CHAPTER IX.

FOUND IN A BUREAU DRAWER.

It was afternoon of the day succeeding that of Frank Melton's recent adventures. He was now in the office of his detective employers, Dick Wister and Joe Smith, to whom he had told the story of his night's experience. The story, however, was not a complete one; the shrewd boy had suppressed one important particular—the hiding of the cut pages, and his recovery of them. He was bound to be even with Dick Wister for his secrecy in his cockney expedition, and to let him know that he could have a secret of his own.

When Frank had completed his story, the two detectives looked at one another with gratified faces.

"Frank is earning his spurs," said Dick. "It looks decidedly as if he had struck the right track. There is but a step from a man's emptying his pocket at the gambling-table to his trying to fill it again from the receiver of stolen goods."

"I did not expect this," answered Joe, shaking his head. "I know something of the cut of a rascal's jib, and I would never have settled on Harry Brown as a thief."

"Faces may be strong, but facts are stronger," rejoined Dick. "The thing looks straight as a die. George Dodge knows of Brown's habits, and is trying to save him as a friend, instead of denouncing him as a criminal. I heard him myself coax him from the gaming-table. Now he seems to have tracked him to the store of his employers, and stopped him there in the very act of theft."

"It has that look, decidedly," answered Joe. "I thought I was a better judge of human nature.—But what about this affair of old Dodge?—The hoary old rascal! I made no mistake about his face."

"It looks like a deuced deep plot," replied Dick. "That woman Marchman is his confederate. I have not yet got to the bottom of her share in the game, but expect to soon size her up. He is a keen old dog, and she a mighty sharp feminine, but I fancy they will soon be both in our clutches."

"What are you going to do about Harry Brown?" asked Frank, suddenly, after listening in silence to this conversation.

"I tell you what it is, I don't believe that man is a thief—if things are so almighty black against him."

"He's got a pretty wife, and three rollicking kids," said Dick, winking to Joe. "Frank thinks that rogues can't marry lovely women and have pretty children."

"There's a mystery somewhere," persisted Frank. "The clouds ain't all cleared off yet."

"That is our business to find out," answered Dick. "What I advise is to inform Dodge &

Halfish of what we have learned, and get them to swear out a search-warrant and make an investigation of Brown's house. If incriminating evidence can be found there, our course is a straight one."

"That is my idea," agreed Joe.

"I reckon there's no going behind that," chimed in Frank. "I've got my ideas, but they ain't nailed fast. If you can find stolen goods in Harry Brown's house, I'll back down in my notions, and give in that he's the thief."

The two detectives were not long in putting their plans into effect. The case of John Dodge, they decided, must wait for fuller developments. That of Harry Brown needed immediate attention. If there was evidence of the robbery in his house, he must have no chance to remove or destroy it.

They accordingly held an interview without delay with the merchants, whom they told what they suspected, though without giving their reasons for their opinion. It was not their purpose that John Dodge should learn that a spy had been concealed in the store while he was experimenting on the books of the firm.

"We have no positive evidence against Mr. Brown," remarked Dick. "Not enough to arrest him on, I think. But quite enough to warrant a search of his house. If anything suspicious is found there, we will know our duty. If nothing—"

"I don't like that 'nothing,'" answered Mr. Halfish. "If he is not guilty, I should be sorry to let him know he has been suspected."

"We are on pretty safe ground," replied the detective. "My advice is to make the search."

"I think so, too," added Mr. Dodge. "I doubt Brown, and have long doubted him. The man is too smooth and innocent."

"It is no proof of guilt to appear innocent," broke in Mr. Halfish. "But proceed, gentlemen; the case is in your hands; take what steps you think necessary. I will not let my private feelings stand in your way."

"Very well, sir; we will have a search-warrant issued at once. If anything incriminating is found, Harry Brown need not sleep at home tonight. We will provide him safer quarters."

"I pity his wife and children," said Mr. Halfish, feelingly; "but justice must take its course."

An hour after this conversation, the two officers made their appearance at the house of the suspected salesman.

Mrs. Brown was at home, and the announcement of their errand threw her into a state of the deepest excitement. To search her house? for suspected stolen goods? What did, what could, it mean? Good Heaven, her husband suspected of theft! the very thought filled her with agony.

The kind-hearted officers could not but feel for her suffering, but their duty lay plain before them, and while one of them sought to soothe her, the other proceeded with the search.

It proved not a very long or exhaustive one, but it was enough. In less than half an hour Dick Wister came down-stairs, with a roll of fine laces in his hand.

"Are these yours, Mrs. Brown?" he asked.

"No, I never saw them before," she cried, her eyes opening widely. "You don't mean—you can't—oh! what am I saying?"

"I found them in one of your bureau drawers. You acknowledge—"

"In my bureau drawer! What—how—surely there is some frightful mistake in this?"

"I should be glad if it would prove a mistake," answered Dick quietly. "I fear it is more than that. I pity your unfortunate husband, and you, Mrs. Brown, and hope this may not prove as dark as it looks."

They left the house after some words more of attempted consolation, leaving the poor woman in a state of frightful distraction. In the end she fell on the sofa in a swoon, and lay there long insensible, deaf to the piteous appeals of her frightened children, who could not understand what made "mamma" sleep so long and look so white.

The officers made their appearance again at the store before the hour of closing for the night.

"Do you know these laces?" asked Dick, showing the criminat roll.

Mr. Halfish fixed his eyes upon them, while a very sad look came upon his face.

"Know them!" cried Mr. Dodge, with no such display of feeling. "I should think so. They are one of our choicest patterns. The fellow went for the best, hang him!"

"Perhaps Brown can explain them," suggested Joe. "He may have obtained them from some other source. Send for him to come here,

gentlemen. We must give him a fair opportunity."

"He cannot explain," answered Mr. Halfish sadly. "That make of lace is kept by no other store in New York. And besides, here is our private mark on the label."

He pointed out to the officers the business hieroglyphics of the firm.

"Brown is our man; there is no question of that. Send for him," said Dick.

Mr. Dodge opened the door to the outer office.

"Tell Mr. Brown to step here," he commanded.

Five minutes afterward the suspected salesman entered the room. He looked with a show of surprise at the persons present, but gave no evidence of knowing for what purpose he was needed.

"Look at those laces, Mr. Brown," said Mr. Halfish. "Do you recognize them?"

"Why, yes, sir. They are part of our last consignment from Van Laun & Co. of Brussels."

"You are sure of that, sir? May they not have come from some other store?"

Harry looked up with a face of deep surprise.

"No doubt they might. I did not know that any other New York house dealt in that special line of goods; but in that, gentlemen, you are much better posted than I can be. Why do you ask?"

"You are aware that a series of robberies have been going on in our store?"

"I have heard whispers of it.—But what has that to do with these laces?" asked Harry in a tone of surprise.

"They are part of the stolen goods."

"Ah!" cried Harry, drawing his breath strongly and suddenly, while his face grew pale.

"Can you tell us anything about them, Mr. Brown?"

"I!—Why do you ask me that?" His aspect was now one of deep alarm. "How should I—where did you find these laces, sir?"

"Can you ask that?" exclaimed Mr. Halfish indignantly. "Who should know better than you?"

"I, sir—Can it be that—have you discovered—" he suddenly became silent, as if recognizing that he was saying too much.

"Those laces were found in your own house, Mr. Brown: in a bureau drawer in your bedroom."

"In my house!" cried Harry, the look on his face changing from alarm to astonishment.

"Impossible!—Found in my house!"

"There is no doubt of that," said Mr. Dodge harshly. "And there is not the shadow of a doubt what their presence there signifies. Officers, you know your duty."

Harry looked from one to another with an air of stupefaction. Nor did he seem to recover his senses till Dick Wister laid a heavy hand on his shoulder, saying:

"You are my prisoner, Mr. Brown."

"Your prisoner!—On what charge?"

"On the charge of robbery from your employers."

"My God, can this be?—Oh, my poor wife, what will become of her?—If I dared speak—But I dare not—no, I have nothing to say, but that I am innocent."

"I should advise you to say as little as possible here," remarked Dick, kindly. "You will come with me."

"Ab! Helen; my wife!" moaned Harry. "My poor, poor wife!"

"I will see your wife, Mr. Brown, and do what I can to comfort her," said Frank, who was present, and had been greatly moved by Harry's suffering.

"You will do me an untold favor. Tell her that I claim to be not guilty; bid her to trust in me, however dark things may appear."

"I will do so," answered Frank, feelingly.

CHAPTER X.

FRANK GETS A NEW IDEA.

"THOSE frightful laces! What do you know about them, Frank? How did they ever come here?" asked Alice Walsh, with the deepest earnestness, of Frank Melton, who had just reached Harry Brown's house on his promised visit of condolence, and found his fair friend there before him.

"That is what I would like Mrs. Brown, or some one, to tell me," replied Frank. "If they can't be explained, the world is dark for the Browns."

"You don't think it can be that Harry Brown—stole them?—Oh! say you don't, Frank?"

Alice wrung her hands in the depth of her feeling.

"Nothing I say or think will mend the matter," answered the boy, whom the late events had ripened almost to manhood. "It's the truth we want to get at. Harry Brown, or somebody, must explain those laces. It looks bad, Alice; very bad."

"It is too terrible to think of," answered Alice. "Chance brought me here this evening—a providential chance, as it proved. I found Helen Brown in a frightful state. She had just come out of a deep swoon, and was raving like one distracted, with her frightened children like scared birds around her."

"It's lucky you came. I stopped at Mrs. Marchman's for you, but found you were out.—Is the poor woman still in that dreadful 'way?'

"No, she is greatly quieted. I think I have a soothing influence upon her."

This conversation had taken place in the front parlor of the Brown residence, where Frank had found his young lady friend on his arrival.

Before more could be said, the door opened and Mrs. Brown appeared. It was evident at sight that she had suffered intensely. Her face was pinched and drawn, her eyes were dilated, a chalky white replaced the red of her lips and cheeks. She had entered impulsively, but stopped on seeing Frank, with a look of mingled hope and fear.

"Oh! you bring me news?" she cried, in deep anxiety. "Not bad news—I hope—I pray! Tell me about Harry."

"There is little to tell, Mrs. Brown. You know he has been arrested."

"Arrested!" She caught her breath. "How could I know it?—Oh! on what charge?—Tell me all!"

She staggered and caught the table for support. Frank sprung to her aid and helped her to a chair.

"I may as well tell you the worst," said Frank firmly. "He has been arrested on a charge of robbing his employers. Those laces are held in evidence against him.—Bear up, Mrs. Brown; suspicion is not proof."

"You are too blunt," cried Alice, indignantly. "Can't you see what a state she is in, you thoughtless fellow?"

"If there's a fence to get over the sooner one is over it the better," returned Frank stolidly. "She's heard the worst now. It had to come some time."

Mrs. Brown had grown deathly pale, and gasped for breath. She clasped the arm of the chair nervously, and turned to Frank.

"What do you think?" she asked, feebly. "Do you—can you believe him guilty?"

"I ought to, I suppose, but I can't," answered Frank. "He behaved in a very odd fashion when he was arrested, and talked in a way that did not help him.—But for all that I believe he is innocent."

"Oh, thank you!" she caught his hand and pressed it fervently. "He was distracted, no doubt, and knew not what he said. Did no one come to his assistance? Where was his intimate friend, George Dodge?"

"George Dodge!" exclaimed Alice. "Is he his intimate friend?"

"Yes;—why do you ask?"

"Oh!—no matter."

"You mean something, Alice. Tell me, dear friend; why did you speak in that tone? What do you know about George Dodge?"

"He would like to be my intimate friend also," answered Alice; "but I prefer not. There is something in this young man that does not appeal to me."

"Why, I have always found him very pleasant and agreeable; and such a warm friend of Harry's.—He was here only this morning, and left that little present as a surprise to Harry." She pointed to a small vase on the mantel. "A surprise! Oh! to think!" and the poor wife burst into a flood of tears.

Alice hastened to her and caught her in her arms, laying her cheek on the tear-wet cheek of her friend."

"Do be calm, Helen! For your children's sake do. You told me you would."

"It is so hard—so hard, Alice! I feel as if my heart would break."

"Cheer up, dear. All may be for the best. Do not take on so."

Frank stood looking on at this scene with a stolid face. Some thoughts in his brain had driven all feeling from his heart. Mrs. Brown's words had given him a vital idea.

"Did you say George Dodge was here this morning?" he asked, after she had become somewhat quieter.

"Yes; he spent an hour here." Surprise at

this abrupt question checked Mrs. Brown's tears, and she looked up inquiringly.

"Were you with him all the time?"

"Why, no; he told me to go to my work in the kitchen, and he would have a frolic with the children. I left him half an hour with them."

"Was he with them all that time?"

"How can I say? Little Alice did say that he went out of the room for a minute or two, but I thought nothing of that."

"It might be best for you to remember it, though; and teach little Alice to remember it, too."

"What do you mean?" asked Alice wonderingly. "I don't understand you, Frank."

"Did you ever see the play of Faust at the theater?" asked Frank.

"Why, yes.—What has that to do with it?"

"You remember that red devil, Mephistopheles, that's at the bottom of all the rascality?"

"Yes. One can't easily forget him."

"George Dodge don't wear red, but—"

"What!—Do you think him a Mephistopheles?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Mr. Melton!" exclaimed Mrs. Brown. "How can you say such a dreadful thing of Mr. Dodge?"

"Somebody put those laces in your drawer, Mrs. Brown."

"You don't think—" The poor woman sprung up from her chair, with dilated eyes and breathless lips. "You don't mean that—"

"The least said the soonest mended," answered Frank. "But I don't believe your husband is a thief, and I'm not going to let him be snowed under if I can help it."

"Oh! you good fellow!" cried Alice, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him, from a hasty impulse. "I always loved you, Frank."

"And I reckon I dropped into that ditch when I first got my eyes on you," answered Frank, returning her kiss with interest.

"Boy and girl love, I mean," cried Alice, blushing rosily.

"All right, sweetheart. Maybe it will grow up when we do."

"I feel like doing the same thing," said Mrs. Brown, who had brightened up amazingly.

"Pile in," answered Frank jubilantly. "I can stand a frightful lot of that sort of thing."

"You are only a boy, you know," and Mrs. Brown kissed him fervently.

"That came from the right spot and went to the right spot," said Frank laughingly. "You've got another look on your face and another color in your cheek, Mrs. Brown."

"But can you think that George Dodge—my husband's bosom friend—"

"Don't say another word about that. That is my little secret. I want you to promise not to speak of it till I give you the liberty."

"I won't."

"Alice, you take care of this little woman. I'm going to bring Harry out all right. There's a mystery yet, but I've got to the top of it, and am going to get to the bottom of it. Good-by."

"You are not going already?" cried they both together.

"Why, I'd like amazing to give you two or three hours more of my agreeable company, but I've got business to do to-night;—business about this job, Mrs. Brown."

"Oh, then, let us not keep you a minute! Go, go!"

"Now you want to get rid of me. I'd serve you right to stay.—But I'm going. Good-by, Mrs. Brown; good-by, sweetheart."

"Good-by, you dear little boy."

Frank was away with a gay laugh, which was echoed from Alice's happy lips.

But he was grave enough again by the time his feet touched the dock in New York. He had a purpose before him of whose result he was in serious doubt.

His first movement was to his home—a very humble one in a retired portion of the great city.

Here he changed his clothes, and, in remembrance of Dick's operations on a previous occasion, lined and painted his face till he had got rid of much of his youthful look, and appeared of manly age.

"I reckon that'll do," he said, as he looked at himself in the glass. "I bet I could put in a vote on that face. It's good for gaslight anyhow, though I'm not sure of daylight."

Leaving his home again, he wound through street after street till he had gained a distantly removed section of the great city. The building before which he now stopped was the one where he had met the disguised detective on a former occasion.

"I calculate my face and my brass together ought to take me in there," he said to himself.

"I know the password, and that's three-fourths the game."

He was not slow in trying. Entering the tap-room, he employed the same tactics which had been used by Dick Wister on the former occasion, and with the same success. He was admitted without difficulty to the gambling room.

Frank's purpose in coming here was not very clearly defined. The thought ran in his mind to question the banker about George Dodge and Harry Brown, and their gambling propensities. He felt sure he had been deceived on that former occasion, and that George Dodge was not the immaculately virtuous individual and Harry Brown the inveterate gamster they had appeared.

But to question about this was another matter. There was a remote possibility of his gaining the information he wanted; there was a decided probability of his being kicked down-stairs.

The boy stood looking at the group around the faro-table, in doubt what to do. His doubt was soon resolved. As he stood irresolute there came to his ears a brief sound of laughter, whose peculiar tone he instantly recognized.

"Mephistopheles again!" he mentally exclaimed. "He here! That helps matters amazingly."

Yes, yonder stood the well-known form of George Dodge—not now as an agent to rescue his friend from ruin, but as an ardent gambler.

Frank, from his position in the background, watched his face. It was firm and impassive, but not rigidly so. Now, as the cards turned strongly against him, a low but deep oath came from his lips. Now, as he drew in a pile of winnings, that short, mirthless laugh broke on the air.

The boy stood and watched him for half an hour. He played deeply and recklessly, occasionally turning from the table to the sideboard and swallowing a deep draught of strong liquor.

At length Frank turned away, fully satisfied.

"I begin to see daylight now," he said. "It's my notion that Harry Brown's the victim of an infernal rascal, whom he has been trying to save from ruin and crime. He's making himself a victim to his friend; but he sha'n't if I can help it."

The young detective left the room, with a strong feeling of satisfaction in his mind.

CHAPTER XI.

GO WEST, YOUNG MAN.

It was not until the next day that the news of the arrest of Harry Brown became generally known in the store. Much feeling was created by it. Harry had been a general favorite, always kind, obliging, and considerate, and his trouble touched many hearts.

"I don't believe he did it," was a very common expression of opinion. "There must be some mistake. This thing of circumstantial evidence—etc."

But there was a different, though less strong current, that of the "I told you so" class.

"They would never have arrested him without sound proof." "Harry has been keeping bad hours lately, and acting as if he had something on his mind." "Where there is so much smoke—etc."

"I am sorry it has come to this," said George Dodge, to the members of the firm. "I have had reason to know, for some time past, that Harry Brown has been leading a fast life, and have tried to check him—but you know—" and he threw up his hands to show the uselessness of his efforts.

"A fast life!" rejoined his father. "Did you know of this business?"

"Hardly. That would have been beyond the limits of friendship. I would not have felt at liberty to keep that secret."

Frank, who was seated at a table in the office, writing diligently, lowered his head over the paper to hide the look that came upon his face.

"I hardly think you would, George," answered Mr. Dodge with an approving nod. "It is a sad thing to be so disappointed in a friend.—That will do, my son. We have sent for Harry to question him further. It would bear too hard on your feelings to be present at the interview."

"It would indeed," returned George, sighing deeply. "Thank you for your consideration, father. I would rather not be present."

George left the room with a show of deep commiseration.

"There goes a wolf in a fox's hide," said Frank to himself. "That man have a friend! Why, he's hardly got enough soul to be his own friend!"

"I'll tell you my view of this affair, Mr. Halibut," said Mr. Dodge, after George had gone.

"I, for one, don't wish to push matters hard against this young man; and I don't believe you do. I have been running the thing over in my mind— Oh! this boy. I forgot.—Frank, will you leave the room for the present?"

"As you say, sir. But you forget I am your detective, Mr. Dodge, and ought—"

"Very true," broke in Mr. Halfish. "Is it anything the boy ought not to know?"

"Not at all. Let him stay. I was thinking of him as a loose-tongued messenger, not as a detective.—Well, this is my idea. I can't think Harry Brown is bad in grain. He has got into trouble by fooling with cards, and has been led by folly into crime. I should not like to have his ruin on my conscience. Now, I fancy he will hardly go wrong again, after this lesson, and what I should propose is to set him free, on his promise to leave New York and go West. If we hush this up there is nothing to hinder him doing well and bearing an honest reputation in a new locality."

"I am glad to hear you speak so, John," said Mr. Halfish, feelingly, as he warmly grasped his partner's hand. "Such sentiments do honor to your heart. Your idea hits my view exactly. I would not like to ruin the young man for one slip. But we must try and find him a place in the West, so as not to let him drift deeper into crime."

"I hardly go that far with you," answered Mr. Dodge. "It seems to me enough to set him free, without rewarding him for his villainy. Let him shift for himself, say I. He needs a sharp lesson."

"Another wolf in fox's bide," said Frank to himself. "Old Dodge has something behind this. He's got blazingly kind-hearted all of a sudden. Wants to get Harry Brown out of the way, does he? What for? There's something more for me to find out."

Further debate on the subject was hindered by the appearance of the accused salesman, who came under the control of Dick Wister. He was looking pale and troubled, yet the expression on his face was hardly that of a detected criminal.

"Sit down, Mr. Brown," said Mr. Halfish, gravely but not unkindly. "I am very, very sorry to find you here under such distressing circumstances. I might ask you if you have anything to say for yourself, but—" He paused significantly.

"I have but one thing to say," answered Harry, in a low but firm voice. "That is, that I am innocent. I acknowledge that circumstances—"

"Circumstances!" broke in Mr. Dodge, harshly. "It looks to me a little stronger than circumstantial evidence, to find stolen goods in your drawers. Who put them there, if not you?"

"I would like to tell you—if I could," answered Harry; "but, Mr. Dodge—"

Dick laid his hand on the young man's arm at this juncture.

"I would say no more if I were you," he remarked, warningly. "Unless you can prove your innocence fully to the satisfaction of these gentlemen, you had better save all statements for your counsel."

"I have no—" began Harry again. "But," he checked himself, "you may be right. I cannot prove it here—perhaps nowhere.—Yet I am innocent of this crime."

"I should be glad to be convinced you were, Mr. Brown," rejoined Mr. Halfish, gravely. "If you can explain those circumstances—the laces in your drawer—your losses at the gaming-table—your visit after night to our store—Young man, young man, it pains me deeply to think—that you—our trusted salesman—"

The old gentleman could say no more. Tears stood in his eyes.

"It pains me more deeply to think that you can believe me capable of such a deed," answered Harry, in a thickened voice.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," remarked Dick Wister. "I fear that this conversation is ill-advised. There is enough against Mr. Brown to hold him to answer at court, and he has refused to explain these criminatizing circumstances—if he can.—Of course, if you choose to dismiss the case, that is your privilege; but you scarcely intend to go so far as that."

"I am not so sure of that, Mr. Wister," answered Mr. Dodge.

"Why, am I to understand—" began the detective, in surprise.

"We have this purpose in mind," interrupted Mr. Halfish. "Saying that Mr. Brown is guilty in this case, he is certainly not a hardened criminal; and I, for one, should not like to have a hand in his ruin. My partner and I have talked

this matter over, and have decided to give him a chance to redeem himself."

"What! to dismiss the evidence!" broke in Harry, eagerly. "To try me again in—"

"Not quite that, young man," interrupted Mr. Dodge. "The burnt child dreads the fire. Suppose you let Mr. Halfish finish."

"Our idea is to dismiss this case," resumed Mr. Halfish, "on the understanding that Mr. Brown shall leave New York and seek a new home in the West, where he may begin a new life.—In New York, I fear, his career is at an end. The fact of his arrest, and the cause of it, are known in the store, and may soon be known throughout the city. We do not want to push him to the wall, and therefore— What do you say to this, Harry?"

"That I am infinitely obliged for your kindness," answered Harry, with much emotion. "It is more than I could have expected.—But, I should prefer not to accept it."

"Not accept it!—Why?" broke out Mr. Dodge.

"Because I know myself innocent," was the firm answer. "I would rather trust to justice and the law, than fly and leave the shadow of guilt behind me."

"Justice and the law!" exclaimed Mr. Dodge, with a harsh laugh. "Why, man, there is enough against you to hang you! If you will take a wise man's advice you will follow Horace Greeley's precept: 'Go West, young man!'"

"I may not be a wise man; but I am an innocent one," persisted Harry. "I am willing to trust that innocence will prevail."

"Oh, Harry, consider what you do!" came in a woman's voice behind him, with almost a wail in its tones. "The law—and all so black before us—"

Harry turned sharply at the first words. His wife stood there, her face drawn with pain and terror.

"You here!" he cried in tones of deep emotion. "Oh, Helen! my wife! my wife!"

"Oh, Harry! my wronged and innocent husband!" and the excited woman rushed forward and threw her arms around him.

"You believe in me still?—You trust me?—Then all is not lost!" and he drew her to him and pressed a fervent kiss on her forehead.

"I have heard what has been said, Harry," said his wife, "and you must do as these kind gentlemen advise. I am afraid of the law, but I am not afraid of you. Think of me, Harry! think of our children! Let us go West, as they kindly advise, and begin there a new life."

"And leave here an old one, with the dark cloud of crime resting upon it?—No, Helen, I cannot—I cannot! I am innocent, my wife, and the world must know it."

"See here, my dear young friend," remarked Mr. Dodge, laying his hand on Harry's shoulder, "don't play the fool for the glory of playing the martyr. You have told us yourself you cannot explain how those laces came into your drawers. Haven't you the wit to see that *that* is enough to send you to prison, and that the world will think ten times worse of you than it does now? Why, man, this clear-headed little woman has ten times your wit. Take her advice and give up all such nonsense. Not many firms in New York would give you the chance which I and Halfish have done, and which you are silly enough to want to throw overboard. Be sensible, and do as your wife says."

"Yes, Harry, let us go, let us go! I fear to stay here, with that terrible charge hanging over you."

"Helen, shall I?—think of all—"

"I have thought of all. Let us go, Harry."

"As you will, my dear," he said, with a strong effort. "We will go West, Helen, since you wish it."

"Now that is the most sensible word I have heard you say to-day," broke out Mr. Dodge, in a tone of relief.

"I don't think so," came in a clear voice behind them.

All turned, to behold Frank Melton, who had let fall the pen and risen to his feet.

"What do you mean, Frank?" asked Mr. Halfish.

"That I don't think Mr. Brown has said so sensible a thing. My advice is for him to stay where he is and face the music."

"How is this, youngster?" cried Dick Wister sharply. "What sort of a tune are you playing now?"

"You bet it's a solid one," returned Frank. "Harry Brown didn't steal a cent's worth from Dodge & Halfish; he didn't put those laces in his drawer; he didn't lose any money at faro; and every word I've said I'm here to stand for. He's as innocent as he says he is and I'm the lad to prove it."

"How?"

"That's to come after awhile. I've said enough for this once." And Frank put on his hat and walked from the office, leaving all behind him in a state of the deepest astonishment.

CHAPTER XII.

THE DETECTIVE'S RUSE.

"WHAT in the blazes do you mean, you thin-witted young rogue?" asked Dick Wister somewhat angrily of Frank, when he again got sight of that youthful detective. "Are you laying out to make mischief, or have you got some bee in your bonnet?"

"A regular hummer," answered Frank. "See here, old man, who do you think started that scheme of letting Harry Brown off, and sending him out West?"

"Mr. Halfish, of course. Dodge isn't that sort. I expect his partner had some trouble in bringing him round."

"There you're clean off your eggs. I heard it all, and Dodge was the man that set it up." Frank looked at the detective knowingly.

"The deuce you say! You're sure of this?"

"Dead sure.—And as certain as sin, old Dodge has got an ax to grind in this."

Dick sat silent for several minutes, as if digesting this information. When he again spoke he returned to the original subject.

"You said that Harry Brown was innocent. Who, then, is guilty? Come, youngster, unload. You have picked up something."

"You bet I have, but not more than I can carry. I have been doing some tall scouting, old man."

"Come, let out. What have you learned?"

"I know who the real thief is."

"Go on. Who is it?"

"George Dodge."

Dick whistled at this confident assertion. He fixed his eyes sharply on the boy's intelligent face.

"By Jove, I shouldn't wonder if you had struck oil!" he said. "I have had a finger pointing that way.—Stir up now; unload; what do you know?"

"I don't know anything, but I guess an amazing lot. It's my dead set notion that George Dodge is the gambler and the thief, and that Harry Brown has been trying to hold him back. He is a friend of the old-time sort, and is ready to go to prison to save his friend.—But I don't believe he would if he knew all I know."

"What is that?"

"That George Dodge is a traitor; and that it was he who hid them laces in his house.—There's no use talking, old man, I've got it down fine."

"You seem to have, if you can prove all this. It's about time now to quit traveling round Robin Hood's barn, and go straight through. If what you say is true, it's worth a gold mine. So just stop playing the smart scout with me, and tell your story in short meter."

Dick lighted his pipe, and lay back in his chair to hear the boy's narration. This there is no need for us to repeat; the reader knows it already. Frank gave his reasons for believing that George Dodge had hidden the laces in Harry Brown's house during his visit there; told of how he had seen him ardently engaged in gambling; and expressed his belief that Dodge was joking when he seemed so anxious to draw his friend from the gaming-table and the store.

"That laugh of his is enough to sell him to the devil," concluded Frank. "Why, it's just like screwing an auger into a fellow's leg. Don't tell me that a chap who can laugh like that ain't a born thief."

Dick continued to smoke in silence till he had exhausted his pipe. He then knocked out the ashes and laid it on the table.

"See here, Frank," he said at length. "You're a born detective, that's plain sailing. You've done some mighty good work, my lad, and cleared the sky amazingly.—There's only one dark spot ahead. What the deuce does old Dodge want to get Brown out of the way for? There's a deep secret somewhere, I know, but I haven't been able to get to the bottom of it."

"A secret?" exclaimed Frank, looking up curiously.

"Yes.—Let me tell you, boy, that I had reason to suspect all you have just told; but you've given me some new and solid points. I suspect more than that. It's my fixed notion that all this business of robbery is part of a set scheme, whose object is to get Harry Brown out of the way. Old John Dodge is at the bottom of it, and his rascal of a son is playing his hand for him; but just what it all means, I can't make out. There's some mystery connected with

Harry Brown. Old Dodge is evidently afraid of him. I would give something to get hold of the end of that thread. It is the master thread in the whole piece."

He ceased speaking, and seemed lost in thought.

"Do you know what I think?" asked Frank, after an interval of silence.

"I soon will, I suppose."

"I think we'd best force old Dodge's hand. The first step is to keep Harry Brown here. The next step is to let out to Dodge & Halfish who the real rascal is, and tell them if they want to cover up young Dodge's tricks they've got to set Harry free, and give him a clear bill of lading for his character. It's my notion that will knock the pins from under the old rogue's plots."

"By Jove, boy, I believe you have hit it! I've trusted in you so far, Frank, because I know you can hold your tongue when it is necessary. I will trust you this much further. Old Dodge is preparing some treacherous game against his partner. They have been losing money of late years, and are in something of a tight place. If I ain't badly mistaken, John Dodge is trying to lay his hands on a big pile of cash, and skip, leaving his partner in a sinking ship. That's the lay I'm on, Frank. If I can learn what I want, I will have this old rascal by the neck."

He rose from his chair with these words, and, bidding Frank to wait for him, left the room. Half an hour elapsed before his return, and when he did the boy looked at him with astonishment. The detective who had gone out, came back transformed into the English cockney of a former occasion.

"By the jumping Jehosaphat, old man!" cried Frank, admiringly, "but that's a gay get-up. I'd never known you t'other time only for the smell-sweet on your handkercher."

"That will do, my good fella," answered Dick, condescendingly. "And, aw, don't you folla me now, like you did then, you know."

"Going to old Lady Marchman's?" queried Frank.

"Questions, my good fella, are one thing; answers are another.—Now run back to the store, you truant rogue, and keep your mouth shut and your eyes open, like a true-blue detective."

With these words, spoken in his natural tones, Dick helped himself to his cane and left the room, Frank following him with admiring glances.

"Dick's a sundowner, and no mistake," he said. "I'd like mightily to know what sort of a ring he's got on old woman Marchman's nose. I've got a big mind to toddle to the old lady's shanty myself, and have a confab with my little sweetheart Alice. Somehow, I've got an awful drawing that way."

Leaving the boy to follow the biddings of his fancy, we must turn our attention to the seeming cockney, who an hour afterward, was seated in the Fifth avenue house, in earnest conversation with Mrs. Marchman.

As for the husband of this fair matron, he was nowhere to be seen. Had he been present he might not have approved of the confidential relations which seemed to exist between the cockney and his wife.

Dick sat close beside her on the sofa, her hand in his, and her eyes fixed on him with an ardent look that betokened dangerously warm feelings in her heart.

"You see, aw, Laura," he drawled, returning her glance with interest, while he closely pressed the soft fingers which rested in his, "love has wings; but, aw, you see, it has no pocket. You know I love you, dear," and his arm stole round her willing waist, "but, aw—" he shrugged his shoulders meaningly—"without funds you know—"

"Oh, dear, Arthur," Mrs. Marchman leaned confidently on his shoulder. "If we could fly together from these dull and dreary scenes, to a haven of love! Money—dull dross—we will not need much where love—"

"Excuse me, aw, Laura, but we will need considerable, don't you see. You ain't, aw, a—a foolish young girl; and I ain't aw, a foolish young man. Now see here, you told me, you know—"

"I haven't got it yet, Arthur. And time is growing precious, love."

"Laura, time, as you observe, is precious; and you are, aw, my own precious; but money, dear, cash, don't you know, is more than precious, it is indispensable."

"Oh, you sordid wretch!" she drew back from him with a show of displeasure.

"Come, now, Laura dear, you know I love you like—aw—like sweetmeats." He caught her hand again, and fixed his eyes fervently on hers. "I know who this old flame is, my dar-

ling. I have watched him, and would have wrung his neck only—aw—only that I prefer to wring his pockets, don't you know. Squeeze from him his money, and give him the slip; it will be delicious revenge, my sweet charmer."

His arm had again stolen insidiously round her buxom waist.

"You know how I hate his detested addressees," she murmured in reply, as she nestled cozily within his embrace. "You are right, Arthur, we will need money. Leave it to me. He shall provide it. The ugly old wretch, to think I care for his hated fondlings! He shall pay dearly for his presumption. He has promised to put a large sum into my hands, if I will agree to elope with him.—I really believe the fulsome old fellow loves me dearly, Arthur, and will do anything to win me," and she laughed triumphantly.

"You cunning dear!" he answered, pressing her hand warmly. "How we will laugh at the foolish old rogue, when we reach that bower of bliss in the West," and Dick who had nearly forgotten his cockney accent in his ardor, pressed his lips on hers in a tender kiss.

For some minutes they sat thus, no words passing, but their eyes speaking the language of love. Suddenly she drew back, as a sound was heard outside.

"A visitor, Arthur," she cried. "He, perhaps. You must go, my dear one. If he sees you here all is lost."

"How, aw, shall I escape?" queried Dick, looking round with a show of distraction. "He is coming up the front stairs. Where—how—aw, what is to be done?"

"In here," she exclaimed, opening the door of a room and thrusting him in. "You can reach a back stairway from there. Go, go!" she closed the door behind him, and hastened back to the sofa, where she sunk in breathless excitement just as the other door of the room opened.

The visitor proved to be him whom they had expected, Mr. Dodge, who crossed to the sofa and seated himself beside the lady with an air of possession that betokened intimate associations.

We will not detail what passed between them. It will suffice to say that the disguised detective did not avail himself of the opportunity to escape offered him. On the contrary he remained in the inner room, the door of which he kept slightly open, so that every word that was spoken reached his ears.

Of this seemingly jealous watchfulness Mrs. Marchman was well aware. She sat so as to face the door, and caught at times a glimpse of the face of her concealed lover, and of his finger held up in warning.

She could make no sign in reply, and sat in fear and dread of some collision between the pair of illicit lovers, fancying in her deceived soul that it was pure jealousy that kept Arthur thus on guard.

Fortunately for the purposes of the detective, Mr. Dodge was in a highly confidential humor, and secrets came to the ears of the listener that filled his inmost soul with satisfaction.

"If I haven't got the old scoundrel now where I want him there's no use talking," he said, gleefully to himself. "Frank's behavior last night frightened him, and he is ready to let all go and take to his heels. And, by Jove, he is going to make my dear Laura his banker.—Now, I can't be sure just what's her little game; but I know what mine is. And it's got to be played sharp on the nail."

On the departure of Mr. Dodge, after an hour's visit, the annoyed lady ran angrily to the door which concealed her seeming lover.

"Oh, you bad fellow, how could you?" she cried, testily. "Such a state as you have kept me in! Why I hardly dared breathe for fear he would see you, and you would be at one another's throats. How could you treat me so?"

"You did charmingly, Laura," he replied, kissing her. "We have the old fool now where we wanted him. He will find the wings for our flight. Good-by, my dear. I will see you quickly again."

CHAPTER XIII.

LOVE AND BUSINESS.

WHILE the scene described in the last chapter was taking place in Mrs. Marchman's private sitting-room, another scene in which we are interested was occurring in another part of the same mansion. Frank Melton had carried out his idea of seeing Alice Walsh, and was closeted with her in a less retired apartment of the ample Marchman residence.

It was love up-stairs and love down, in this case, for Frank had a real affection for Alice as

strong as Dick's assumed one for the older lady, and Alice loved her boyish admirer more warmly than she herself knew.

"My charming little sweetheart," cried the ardent boy, taking her by both hands and drawing her to him. "Haven't you a kiss for your own little Frank?"

"My little Frank is getting to be a big Frank," laughed Alice, as she withdrew her hands. "All that was very pretty when we were boy and girl—but now—"

"Bless your heart, Alice, it was only a year ago!"

"A year in time, but ten years in experience, Frank."

"Oh, come, now; you are only a big girl yet, and I haven't a gray hair in my head. I'm here on business, Alice, but I won't say one word about business till I get that kiss."

"What a happy relief for me," she laughed.

"Stolen fruit is always the sweetest, any-how," he gayly replied, drawing her to him, and pressing his lips on hers, with very little show of resistance on her part.

"Oh, you thief; to steal it!"

"Only borrowed, sweetheart.—I'll return it."

"No, you won't. Keep your distance now, young man. What if Mrs. Marchman was to come in?"

Mrs. Marchman was just then engaged in a much less innocent form of the same amusement.

"The old lady!" cried Frank, snapping his fingers. "She'd say, 'Go ahead, young ones.'"

"Come, young man, let me hear your business. I've had about enough of your sugar-coated pills, and prefer to take a plain one now."

"Mercy on us, Alice. I thought you had better taste.—Well, to business then. I'm sure I—"

"Come, come! you take a seat right there, and I'll take a seat right here; and we'll have this table between us. That will put a check on your nonsense.—Well, sir, now what is your business?" Her voice fell into a more serious tone.

"Oh, if you mean it!—Well, then, have you taken my advice, and seen your lawyer about your money? About Mr. Dodge's guardianship, I mean."

"Yes," she replied. "You and that queer Englishman between you have made me nervous about my money."

"What did the lawyer say?"

"That he would look into it, and learn if Mr. Dodge was a safe trustee."

"Has he done so?"

"A little."

"And what has he found out?"

"That Mr. Dodge isn't quite safe. He says that Dodge & Halfish have been over-trading, and that their financial standing is not very good."

"Is that all, Alice?"

"No; he has made application to the Orphan's Court for a new guardian, and Mr. Dodge has received legal notice to file a statement of his trust and its investment and security. The lawyer fears that my guardian has been making unsafe and illegal investments."

"So far good," answered Frank, with an air of satisfaction. "But that's only the beginning of it, Alice. I want you to go right away today and tell your lawyer to crowd old Dodge in the sharpest way. He mustn't lose a day. If he does, I'm afraid you'll never see a cent of your money."

"Why, what do you know about it, boy? One would think you knew all about Mr. Dodge's business."

"Don't I ther? More than he fancies. He's a fox, Alice; but I'm a detective. I know a thing or two. Can't tell it all now; but just you do as I say. You know I've got a say about your money, for when we grow up and get married—"

"Oh, hush, you ridiculous boy! I don't believe you ever will grow up.—But I'll tell the lawyer what you say, though I don't put much faith in your chatter, I tell you that."

"Me chatter! Why, I'm a regular owl, that sees everything and says nothing."

"An owl! You're more like a parrot, that sees nothing and says everything."

Frank laughed gayly.

"You'll live and learn, young lady.—Now let's get down to business again."

"More business!" she made a pouting face.

"Oh, if you're in a hurry to get back to love-making—"

"But I am not in a hurry for anything of the sort."

"Well, there's no accounting for tastes." Frank's sour expression set her off into a laugh.

"Business be it then.—I've got one question for you to answer. Who is Harry Brown?"

"Harry Brown?—Why—Harry Brown.—Who do you think he is?"

"Telling a man's name isn't telling who he is. A man's more than his name."

"Harry Brown is an honest man, that I'm sure of.—He is a good husband and father, that I know.—As for this terrible charge against him—"

"He is innocent, I know it, and I'm going to prove it.—But that's not all, Alice. Where was he born, who is his father and mother, what is his history? You are his wife's friend, and I suppose you know something about all this."

"Why, yes, a little. Helen has told me something about him. He was born in Albany. His father was William Brown, a merchant of that city, who failed in business, and soon after died. His mother came to New York with him, and died just after he grew up. He learned the mercantile business, and has been a salesman in several stores, but most of his time in that of Dodge & Halfish. He married my school friend Helen Marsh six or seven years ago, and they have lived as happily—as happily!"

"As we expect to when we are a few years older."

"Is that business, you tease?"

"No; business is the coffee; that is the sugar in it. It goes down so much better when it's sweet, you know.—But there's one little point yet to be cleared up. Who was Harry Brown's mother?"

"That I don't know."

"Then that's what we've got to know. See here, Alice, you know that Mr. Dodge waits to let Harry off, if he will promise to go West and disappear."

"I thought it was Mr. Halfish."

"Not a bit of it. It's Dodge; our benevolent Dodge. What does he do it for?"

"Perhaps he is kinder-hearted than you think."

"Him?—John Dodge?—See here, girl, he's got an ax to grind. You won't let it out if I let you into a secret?—Not even to Mrs. Brown?"

"You can trust me."

"Well, then, this is the way the cat jumps. The story of robbery from Dodge & Halfish is all a sell. There's been no robbery. The whole trick has been worked up between George Dodge and his noble daddy, and they know just where to lay their hands on the stolen goods.—What's the trick played for? I'll tell you, it's to get Harry Brown safely out of the way. That's why the robbery has been laid on him, and why Dodge wants him to go West. The old rascal's afraid of him. What for I don't know, but I'm bound to find out. That's why I want to know who Harry Brown's mother was, and all about her. Somehow I've got a fancy that the secret of the mystery lies there. I want you to see Helen and find out from her all she knows about old Mrs. Brown. I'll try and see Harry, if I can, but old Dodge has him in charge and won't let anybody see him, except through himself, and I don't want to raise his suspicions."

"Oh, Frank, if you can only prove all this; if you can only clear Harry Brown's character of this stain; I'll—I'll—"

"You'll take back that borrowed article."

"Yes."

The ardent boy was not long in returning the kiss he had borrowed, with another for interest.

"Now I hope you are satisfied," cried Alice, with a pretty pout. "I'm done with borrowing and lending."

"Then I'll have to play the thief, and steal.—When such treasures as these lie open—"

"Hush. I'm going right off to see Helen Brown. You can go where you please."

"You use me badly, so you do, Alice. Good-by, then. I'll earn a kiss by the time we meet again." And the lively boy took himself away with a look of saucy assurance.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN EXCHANGE OF STORIES.

SEVERAL days have passed since the date of the events we have just described, and matters are rapidly approaching a climax. The young detective was not without a double purpose in getting Alice's lawyer to inquire about her guardian, and his purpose has been effected.

In fact, the legal inquiry and its result have filled the air with rumors, and all over town the solvency of Dodge & Halfish is called in question, while the creditors of that firm are full of doubt of their chances of payment.

The fact of this rumor has reached the ears of the parties principally concerned, and in the private office of the firm a serious interview is in progress.

"What do you make of all this, John?" asked Mr. Halfish, with a look of alarm on his face. "Here is a balance sheet which Thomson has just made. Why, we should have cash enough, with assets quickly coming due, to meet all our immediate obligations! But, see here, this is surely a mistake."

Mr. Dodge ran his eye over the sheet, and seemed greatly alarmed.

"Ten thousand in bank! Why, we should have full a hundred thousand!" he exclaimed. "And where are the securities that we had in the Iron Bank? There is no mention of them here. What can this mean, Halfish?"

"Mean!—it means ruin! Worse than that, it means defalcation. By heaven, John, if that money and those securities are gone, we have been robbed more deeply than we dreamed."

"No, no, there is some mistake here. There has been something overlooked. Let us have Parsons in, with his ledger."

"Parsons is not here this morning. He asked permission yesterday to attend a funeral in the country to-day."

"Then we must examine for ourselves."

He opened the office door.

"Mr. Thomson," he called, "bring Parsons's ledger here."

The bookkeeper addressed quickly appeared with a bulky account-book, which he laid on the table before the members of the firm, and retired.

Mr. Dodge carefully closed the door behind him, while his partner opened the book.

For the succeeding hour their two heads were bent closely over the tell-tale pages, while groaning exclamations came at intervals from their lips. At the end of that time they rose from their stooping position and looked each other gravely in the face.

"What do you make of it, John?" asked Mr. Halfish.

"A serious defalcation—and Parsons is the man."

"No one but he had access to this book, or had control of our funds and securities."

"We have been robbed, and robbed at a critical period. If we are pushed by our creditors we will be ruined."

"Parsons must be arrested at once!—Ah! his funeral! Is it a trick? Is he off—off for Canada, with our money in his pocket? We must stop him at once, if the telegraph can do it."

Mr. Halfish hastened to the door, and, in as quiet a voice as he could command, bade one of the clerks to send him the messenger-boy, Frank.

Frank was not long in responding, and was bidden to make all haste to the office of the detectives, and tell either of them that he found there to come to the office of Dodge & Halfish without a moment's delay, on very urgent business.

"It looks as though the bubble's burst," said the boy to himself on reaching the street. "They had that big account book before them. I reckon the time's coming to get in my work."

"In an hour afterward both detectives, accompanied by their apprentice, made their appearance at the office in which the two merchants sat conversing dismally on the situation.

It took them not many minutes to reveal what had happened, Mr. Dodge opening the account-book, and showing page after page of false entries, which had been doctored to hide the defalcation.

"But how could that be done?" asked Lick, innocently. "I see no signs of scratching and changing of figures."

"See here," answered Dodge. "I will show you. The old leaves have been cut out and new ones inserted. See; it has been very neatly done. Parsons, of course, took good care not to see it."

"Well! that is neat work. This man has gone to a funeral, you say?"

"Yes."

"A Canadian funeral. He must be stopped if it can be done. I will take that in hand. Joe, you go on with this examination, while I hurry to the telegraph office. Come, Frank, I may need you."

He left the office with a great show of haste, followed by the boy. On reaching the street, however, Dick, instead of hastening to the telegraph office, led the way to a restaurant at no great distance. This he entered and seated himself at a table, ordering some refreshment.

"Squat yourself there, boy," he said, pointing to an opposite chair. "Now, out with it; tell me what you meant by looking so confoundedly knowing while we were examining the book."

"I think Parsons will come back from his funeral without telegraphing. He's not gone to Canada this hitch."

"I don't believe he has," answered Dick. "It's not likely that there's two rascals of the size of John Dodge in that shanty. But see here, boy, don't you try playing fox on us. You know something about that book job. Tell me what it is or I'll break your neck."

Frank put his two elbows on the table, rested his chin in his hands, and looked Dick saucily in the face.

"Story for story," he answered, with a knowing wink. "You bluffed me off on that English cockney dodge, and I made up my mind to get even with you.—And I have. I know the whole secret of this job. But I won't tell a word of it till you let out your yarn."

"Why, you rat, are you playing that on me? It wasn't Parsons then?"

"No more than it was me.—Now, that's all, till I know what lay the English cockney was on."

"You curious little wretch! Well, I'll tell you; and if you breathe a word of it I'll break your neck in earnest."

"They won't get a word out of me with trip-hammers, till you pull up the sluices, and tell me to sail in."

"This is my secret, then, Frank. Old Dodge has robbed the firm, and put the money in Mrs. Marchman's hands. It is his purpose, I judge, to run away with that charming woman, and leave her husband and Mr. Halfish to console each other, while Parsons will lay in prison as the seeming criminal."

"And Harry Brown with him."

"That is another affair. I don't understand that Harry Brown business yet.—But no matter for that. When Mrs. Marchman absconds, it will be with Arthur Hughes, a sprightly young Londoner, and all she will take to remind her of John Dodge will be his money."

"Ha!" exclaimed Frank. "Is that the cockney's game? But you are not going to run off with her in earnest?"

"She is a trifle too old," answered Dick, with a grimace. "And I am a trifle too honest.—Now it is your turn, boy. What do you know?"

"That Parsons had nothing to do with that job. It was done by John Dodge, and I saw him do it."

"The deuce you did!—Why, you close-mouthed young rascal!" and he slapped Frank approvingly on the shoulder. "Come, out with it, now."

Thus requested, Frank told the story of his night's adventure, and how he had overlooked old Dodge's secret operations.

"Good!" exclaimed Dick, when he had ended. "That clears the sky. I know where we stand now. The cut leaves, you say?"

"Mr. Halfish is taking care of them for me, as private papers of my own," answered Frank, with a laugh.

"Why, youngster, you're worth your weight in gold. I vow I didn't dream you had such good stuff in you. I think we have old Dodge and his worthy son just about where we want them. Only one point remains to be cleared up. What became of the goods that were stolen from the store, and why does Dodge want to get rid of Harry Brown?"

"For the goods, if I were you, I'd search old Dodge's house. You know that George lives at home with his daddy.—About Harry Brown I'm trying to find out something."

"Go on, then. I am working that same game. If you can beat me you are welcome."

After a few words more Frank left the restaurant, and made his way to Fifth avenue, where he rung at Mrs. Marchman's house, and asked for Miss Walsh.

Another servant than his old victim answered the bell, and he quickly found himself in Alice's presence.

Frank was not now in the mood for his frivolity of a few days before. Matters were approaching a climax that did not admit of trifling.

"You have seen Mrs. Brown?" he asked Alice.

"Yes."

"And what is the result?"

"She tells me that Harry's mother was a native of Albany, her maiden name being Mary Morton. She was the only daughter of her mother, who, however, had a son by a former marriage. The son proved a bad fellow, and in the end left Albany for his own good. Helen has a photograph of him, taken when he was a boy. She loaned it to me, and I have it here."

"Good. What was the bad boy's name?"

"John Robinson. What became of him none of the family seems to know."

"Have you the portrait?"

"Yes. Here it is." She handed him a somewhat tarnished photograph.

Frank looked at it closely. It was a strongly-marked face, with indications on it of a dissipation which seemed out of place in one so young. He examined it from side to side and from end to end, and shook his head.

"It tells me nothing," he said, and handed it back to the young lady.

In doing so he caught a final glimpse of the face, at a long angle.

"One moment, Alice," he said, with a change of voice. "Let me look at this again."

He examined it more closely than before, and then remarked:

"I'd like to show this to another person. I suppose it doesn't matter."

"What is it, Frank?" she asked, eagerly. "Does it tell you anything?"

"I'm not sure whether it does or not. I want Dick Wister to get his eyes on it. It is not best to talk till I am sure."

"Not to me, Frank?" in a tone of reproach. "After what I have done?"

"Oh, to you, Alice! Yes, anything to you. But you must pay for the information. It is too valuable to be given away."

"Pay for it! How?"

"There is only one coin I can take from you."

"You rogue! Well, take it, then." She held up her pouting lips to be kissed, an invitation which Frank was not slow to accept.

"Now, tell me," she demanded.

"If I'm not much mistaken, Alice, John Robinson now calls himself John Dodge, and John Dodge is Harry Brown's uncle. Maybe we can find out now why he wants to get rid of him."

CHAPTER XV.

THE CAGING OF THE FOX.

"You are my prisoner, Mr. Parsons."

These words were spoken by Dick Wister, as his hand fell on the shoulder of the white-headed old clerk, who started violently at the touch.

"Your prisoner!"—Parsons's mouth fell open, and his eyes stared wildly. "Arrested!—What under Heaven for?"

It was the day after that of the discovery of the defalcation. Mr. Parsons had not gone to Canada, but had duly returned from his funeral, and made his appearance at the office of Dodge & Halfish, in honest ignorance of anything being wrong.

"I will show you what for," declared Mr. Dodge harshly, as he threw open the pages of the ledger. "See here—and here, my man. You have robbed us, and cooked up the accounts to hide your robberies. Look at your work—and tell us what you have done with the hundred and fifty thousand dollars of the missing funds."

The old man looked at the pages with blanched checks and staring eyes.

"As I am a living man, I never—" he began. "Great Heaven, who has tampered with that book? I never made those figures, as I stand here!"

"That is easily said," answered Mr. Dodge severely. "Nobody but you ever handled this ledger. We have found you out. It was neatly done, Parsons. You have cut out the old leaves and put in the new ones very—"

The old man rushed up, pushed him aside and stared at the base of the leaves, which had plainly been gummed in.

"Who has done this?" he groaned. "It is a plot to ruin me. Yet I did not know I had an enemy in the world."

He fell back in a chair, and covered his face with his hands completely overcome with the shock.

"You may as well make a clean breast of it," remarked Mr. Dodge, surveying him with pitiless eyes. "What became of the leaves that were cut out? Did you burn them, or—"

"I know nothing about them," groaned the miserable man.

"If you're very anxious to know maybe I can give you a little information on that point," came a voice from the rear. It was that of Frank Melton, on whom all eyes were now turned.

"You!" exclaimed Mr. Halfish, now first speaking. "What can you possibly know about it?"

"I'm not a big fellow, Mr. Halfish, but I can hold a good deal," answered Frank. "I haven't been messenger round here all this time without picking up some stray bits of news, and I'm going to open your eyes. Just s'pose you give me them private papers you took care of for me."

"Why, what can they have to do with this

question?" asked Mr. Halfish in surprise. "Here they are, if you want them; but I do not see—" He walked to the fireproof safe as he spoke, and took from it the sealed envelope which Frank had given him. "Here it is. But, what it has to do with this affair is beyond my comprehension."

"Don't make up your mind too rapid, Mr. Halfish," said Frank, while all the others stood looking at him with surprise. Even the old clerk lifted his head and gazed in wonder and hope on the confident boy.

"Anyhow, you won't mind looking over these private papers of mine," continued Frank, tearing open the envelope and taking out its contents, which he handed to Mr. Halfish. "Just see if these ain't nice nest-eggs."

Mr. Halfish's face grew long as he unfolded the wide sheets and looked at their tell-tale surface.

"By all that's good!" he cried, in deep astonishment, "those are the pages cut from the ledger! Why, boy, where did you ever—Was it you—" He ceased speaking suddenly, and stared at Frank with eyes of doubt and question.

But, greatly as he was astonished by the revelation, his partner was much more so. With an impulsive movement, and a sound from his lips like a suppressed oath, Mr. Dodge sprung to his desk, snatched the key from his pocket, inserted it in the lock of the lower drawer, and in a moment jerked the drawer wide open.

Moved by the same unthinking impulse he thrust his hand down among the papers it held—but the next instant withdrew it with an air of confusion, as if a conception of the folly of his action had suddenly come to him.

"Don't stop, Mr. Dodge," remarked Frank mockingly. "Go ahead and fetch it out. Them that hide can find, you know.—If you don't want to, I will." He thrust his hand into the place where Mr. Dodge's had been, and drew out the sealed envelope.

"Open it, Dick Wister," he said, handing it to the detective. "Mr. Dodge knows very well where it is, you see. Hidings is findings. But I took the liberty to change it, and Mr. Halfish has got the genuine papers."

"Why, you young hound!" exclaimed Mr. Dodge, glaring on him furiously. "Do you dare accuse—"

"Accuse you of cutting out those leaves, and putting in new ones?—Well, that's about the size of it. I saw the whole business, you know, and can swear to it from the shoulder."

Dodge glared at the triumphant Frank with the eyes of a wolf; then, seizing a heavy paper-weight, made a tiger-like spring toward him.

He was stopped, however, by the hand of Dick Wister, who grasped his shoulder with a vise-like grip.

"Not so fast, my good sir!" he quietly remarked. "You can't knock out the boy's evidence with a paper-weight. Mr. Halfish, permit me to present to you the real criminal. Not only the one who has doctored your books, but the one who robbed your store. This is the man, not Harry Brown, who made free with your silks and laces."

"Me!" exclaimed Mr. Dodge, with a violent oath. "Liar and villain! Prove it, if you can!"

"I rarely say things until I am ready to prove them, Mr. Dodge," answered the unmoved detective. "The goods were not taken by your hands directly, but by that of your worthy son, who is a true chip of the old block.—Harry Brown is as innocent as you or I, Mr. Halfish. It was a set-up job on him."

"I don't understand," answered Mr. Halfish, looking distractedly from the triumphant face of the detective to the sullen and lowering countenance of his partner. "Mr. Dodge rob the store?—Why?—For what purpose? What advantage could it be to him?"

"His advantage lay in the disadvantage of Harry Brown," rejoined Dick. "Who was it proposed to let this young man off, on condition of his going West?"

"Mr. Dodge first suggested it."

"It was not like him, was it?"

"I confess it took me by surprise."

"Perhaps he had a purpose in wanting to get rid of him."

"There is enough of this," cried Mr. Dodge, whose expression during the last few minutes had varied between surprise, terror, and rage. "You have worked up a very pretty story, it seems, Mr. Dick Wister. Maybe you'd like to prove a little of it before you go on."

"Just so," broke in Frank. "I was to get an extra two hundred shiners if I could lay my hand on the stolen goods. Fetch 'em along, if

you've got them, for I'd like mighty to handle them shinners."

At this summons Joe Smith, the second detective, who had recently entered the room, stepped forward and laid a bulky package on the table.

"Here is a part of them," he remarked. "The rest will be here soon."

Mr. Halfish, whose amazement was momentarily increasing, threw open the package, and revealed the sheen of its silky contents.

"What am I to understand?" he replied.

"Where were these goods found?"

"We have taken the liberty to search Mr. Dodge's house," rejoined Joe. "This is a part of the plunder we found concealed there."

"Liar! Wretch!" exclaimed the detected villain, his eyes rolling wildly. He made a desperate effort to break from Dick's grasp, but found this impossible. The next instant, with a striking change of expression, he sunk with a groan into a chair, and dropped his face on his hands.

Mr. Halfish turned and gazed on him long and sternly. Now for the first time did he fully realize the villainy of his partner, and the thought of such base treachery seemed to rend him to the soul.

Scarcely a moment, however, did Mr. Dodge remain thus abashed. Suddenly he sprung to his feet and made a wild rush to the door, whose handle he seized and turned furiously. The door refused to open!

"Not so fast, sir," remarked Joe. "I took the liberty to lock it. We are not quite through with you yet."

"You are as well off here," added Dick. "You can run away with Mrs. Marchman after we are done with you if you wish, but I hardly think you will. I have relieved her of the one hundred and fifty thousand which you put in her hands, and also have put my seal on the money of Miss Walsh, your ward. If you want the woman, you are welcome to her, but the money will stay in New York."

The last blow floored the villain. He staggered like a blind man, and collapsed into a chair, while his head and breast fell forward at full length on a table, and his arms hung down helplessly by his side.

"Flings up the sponge," said Dick. "Mr. Halfish, you know now where the leak is. Mr. Parsons, you are free. As for Harry Brown—"

"Yes, Harry Brown!" broke out Mr. Halfish, as if glad to have something that he could take hold of. "Here is a mystery still. Why did this wretched man want to injure Harry Brown? Why did he wish to get him out of the way?"

"That John Robinson might inherit the estate which has just been left to the heirs of Mrs. Mary Robinson, of Albany."

This was the final blow. At these words the miserable criminal sprung hastily up, his face haggard, his eyes wildly starting, foam standing on his lips. Some disjointed words came from him. Mere wild ravings, and then he fell at full length on the floor, where he lay helpless and groveling.

Dick Wister stood looking on him with no show of feeling on his face.

"Cornered," he said. "Caught in his own trap.—Mr. Halfish, I have a little story to tell you about your partner. You do not know all his history."

"It seems I do not," answered Mr. Halfish, with a face that seemed past surprise.

"You have always known this man as John Dodge. His real name is John Robinson. His birthplace was Albany, but his youthful life there was so wild a one that he found it convenient to leave that city, change his name, and come to New York, where he has prospered in business as John Dodge."

"This is certainly news to me.—But what is its connection with Harry Brown?"

"Harry Brown's mother was a half-sister to John Robinson, so that John Dodge is the uncle of the man he has sought to ruin. Recently a large legacy has been left to the heirs of Mrs. Mary Robinson. These heirs are the man who lies there, and the nephew whom he has sought to ruin, with the purpose of getting him out of the way in order that he might obtain all this legacy for himself. The result has been as you see. In trying to grasp too much he has lost all, and brought ruin on himself."

"But why has he sought to rob me—and to rob himself in the effort?"

"There is another tale to be unfolded, Mr. Halfish. You must know something of the power of illicit love. It has been strong enough to destroy this shrewd rogue's reason. He became infatuated with Mrs. Marchman—a lady of somewhat doubtful repute. She consented

to an elopement with him, and for that purpose he robbed the business and placed all the funds he could raise in her hands, doctoring your books meanwhile, so as to throw the blame for his crime on Mr. Parsons's shoulders. It was his purpose to fly with this lady and the cash, take back his old name of John Robinson, and apply for the Albany legacy, after first getting the other heir safely out of the way. It was a very well devised and complicated scheme, but it has failed, as you see, largely through the aid of our young detective, Frank Melton.—As for Mrs. Marchman, she never had any intention of eloping with this man, but she and her husband were working him for their own ends. I have cultivated the lady, and learned all Mr. Dodge's plans; and your money is safely under my hands."

"You? How did you do it, Mr. Wister?"

"By making love to her myself, disguised as a spruce young Englishman. The woman had taste enough to appreciate my manly charms, and folly enough to reveal her whole game to your humble servant."

"You are a jewel of a detective," exclaimed Mr. Halfish. "And Frank here is—"

His sentence was never completed; for the seemingly insensible man, who lay prostrate on the floor, now sprung wildly to his feet, raving so violently that it was evident his brain had been turned by the shock.

Like a maniac he rushed on the detective, and might have done him an injury had not the others come hastily to his aid.

Handcuffs and ropes were necessary to prevent him harming some of them or himself, while the cries and execrations that came from his lips were frightful to hear.

"We will not have the trouble of trying this man for crime," remarked Dick. "He is a candidate for a cell in the insane asylum instead of in a prison. The exposure of his crime has addled his brain, and made him a raving maniac."

There was, in fact, but one thing to be done. The deep-laid plot had been completely revealed, and its principal agent had, in truth, lost his reason. A carriage was quickly procured, and the violent man driven off, under charge of the two detectives.

As for Mr. Halfish, he remained with a violent whirling in his brain, due to the strong emotions of the past hour, which made him feel almost as if he, too, was losing his reason.

Yet he had every reason to feel gratified. The peril to his business had been removed, the villain who had sought to ruin him had been detected, and the two innocent men, to whose attempted ruin he had been made a party, were cleared of every shadow of crime.

Two criminals remained—George Dodge and Mrs. Marchman. Yet, of the latter, it could only be said that she had taken charge of money placed in her hands; there was no proof that she had knowledge of its source.

The case against George Dodge was equally difficult to prove. What Frank Melton knew about him was not sufficient to convict him in court, while Harry Brown positively refused to give evidence against him.

He privately acknowledged to Mr. Halfish that he had discovered George's practices, and had sought as a friend to lure him from ruin, following him for this purpose to the gaming-table and to the store. But he declared that he would not give evidence against him, and Mr. Halfish, therefore, concluded to let the prosecution drop.

We may briefly conclude our story. The Albany legacy was duly received, and divided between Harry Brown and George Dodge, the latter receiving his father's share in trust.

With this money Harry was admitted as a partner in the business of Dodge & Halfish, he buying out Dodge's interest, and the firm name becoming Halfish & Brown.

Mr. Parsons, in payment for his long services and the false charge which had been brought against him, received a large increase of salary, and became the confidential clerk of the new firm, a position for which his long experience adapted him.

We need scarcely say that Frank Melton received the reward which had been promised him, with a large addition. He was offered also a good position in the store, but preferred to remain in his chosen profession of detective, to which nature and education had so well adapted him.

But he became a firm friend of Harry Brown and his interesting family, while the "three kids" hailed him, on his frequent visits, almost as one of themselves.

That he and Alice Walsh continued more than

friends, the reader may well surmise. To Frank she remained his "little sweetheart," and he looked forward confidently to the day when she should become his "big wife," but that day of wedded bliss has not arrived at this present writing.

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers.
98 William street, New York.